

## Advent reflections

In an increasingly secularized world, Christians need to have a clear understanding about who Jesus is, in order to share his love with others. Sunday School concepts and picture-book images can dominate our thinking about him, yet he is central to our faith, and we can only grow as believers when we truly know him.

Advent is a time of preparing for Jesus. What better time for coming to a richer understanding of who he is?

In this book, Rob Frost adapts his Bible studies, heard by thousands at Easter People, into a user-friendly introduction to the person of Jesus. These are daily devotionals to strengthen your faith, clarify your understanding and sharpen your discipleship.

Rob Frost is National Evangelist for the Methodist Church in the UK. He has written 18 books, including four novels, presents a programme on Premier Radio every Sunday morning, and is in great demand as a speaker and broadcaster. Rob is also the founder of the Share Jesus Mission programme, which has helped hundreds of churches around the world benefit from evangelistic work, and every year he leads Easter People, a Christian holiday for over 10,000 people. He has a PhD from King's College, London, and is married to Jacqui with two teenage sons.



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Designed by Louise Belcher

# Jesus in the Third Millennium

## ROB FROST

Advent reflections on the Son of God



## Jesus: the Beginning and the End

REVELATION 1:7-8

Look, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.  
So shall it be! Amen.

*'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'*

When I was driving through Northumberland late one clear but wintry night, I was awestruck by the great panoply of stars that seemed to engulf me. Suddenly, without warning, a shooting star travelled across the horizon in a trail of white light.

I was in the midst of a hectic round of meetings over three days across the north of England. I was living by timetables, and rushing breathlessly from one appointment to the next. Suddenly, my busyness was punctured by a star... and eternity broke in.

I remember that it was a star which broke into the hectic lives of scholars from the East to herald the coming of a Saviour. That same star led them to look beyond the priorities of their earthly kingdoms to seek something more significant. It led them to a stable in a little backwoods town called Bethlehem.

The coming of Jesus into the world was the moment when God tore away the backdrop of human history to reveal eternity—when, through the birth of a tiny baby, time kissed perpetuity.

Every Advent, I find myself returning to this familiar theme. Of all

the Advent messages I've preached, this one always seems special. It's a reminder that in these hectic days before Christmas, Jesus comes to us from the time-zone of timelessness.

*He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.'*

REVELATION 21:6

We are preoccupied by time. My watch broke this week, and, unable to access the time instantly moment by moment through the day, I became aware of how it dominates my thinking, rules my life, drives me on. Jesus is not ruled by time, for he is the Lord of eternity. When we connect with him, we view life from a different perspective. We march to the beat of a different drum.

We are preoccupied by transience. Today I stood looking at an ancient gravestone in a tiny northern village called Hamsterly. It told of a man who won a poetry prize and whose poetry was 'published in a London periodical' in the seventeenth century. The name is unknown, the poetry gone to dust and the importance of his achievement swept away by the winds of change. Jesus, however, is not dominated by transience, for he is permanence itself. In connecting with him, our lives form the lyrics of a more lasting song.

We are preoccupied by mortality. We look in the mirror to trace the lines of our ageing. We sense the stiffness of the years, and our shortness of breath declares the brevity of our existence. We are scared of the future and frightened about tomorrow. Our mortality stalks us, and creeps up on us just when we think we're safe.

The baby who stepped down from eternity rose up to take his place at God's right hand. While we are preoccupied with mortality, he occupies immortality. While we fear the future, he stands at the end of time to greet us... the Lord of all eternity.

So Advent is a time for putting our hectic lives within the context of Christ's timelessness; for setting the insecurities of the future within the knowledge that he is already there, waiting to greet us; for placing the billowing waves of human history within the story of his ultimate victory. But best of all, Advent is the season for knowing



that he is present today, and that the Lord of eternity can meet us in the here and now.

*'Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.'*

REVELATION 22:12-13

### Prayer

*Lord, I'm preoccupied with time:*

*Show me your omniscience.*

*I'm preoccupied with fading things:*

*Show me your permanence.*

*I'm preoccupied with passing days:*

*Show me your immortality.*

*I'm preoccupied with future plans:*

*Show me your great design.*

*I'm preoccupied with my busyness:*

*Show me your eternity.*

## MONDAY OF WEEK ONE

# Jesus: the Creator

JOHN 1:1-5

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*

When I was struggling to understand Christianity as a teenager, my youth leader once said, 'There's only one miracle that you have to believe, Rob—that the one who created the cosmos stepped down to live in it.'

He had a point. My struggles with the miracles of the stilled storm, the healed leper and the empty tomb all disappeared once I could accept that the One who created all things was willing to enter his creation and be born into a peasant family in Palestine. Gradually I came to accept the opening of John's Gospel as true.

I've returned to this familiar thought again and again during Advent down the years, and it still takes my breath away. For me, the mystery of the Creator entering the creation lies at the heart of the Advent message.

I recently attended a Bible study led by a young Christian, and there was a freshness about it that startled me. 'Isn't it wonderful,' he said, 'that the Creator of the universe became a carpenter—an artist in wood.' I'd never connected the two before—that the one who flung the stars into space and invented colour, scent, tone and texture... the one who imagined the tall pine, the mighty oak, and the silver birch... came on earth to work in a carpenter's shop!

How skilfully Jesus must have worked with the wood! What perfect things he must have made! How he would have brought the



patterns of the grain into his work! Little did those who bought this craftsman's tables, chairs, wooden bowls and plates realize that they were shaped by the hands that shaped the universe.

This Advent, gaze in wonder at the world around you—the changing seasons, the scudding clouds, the pale sunshine breaking through the clouds, and the starry winter skies. This Advent, look for the One who created it, and watch for his reflected glory. Paul recognized it when he wrote:

*Christ is exactly like God, who cannot be seen. He is the firstborn Son, superior to all creation. Everything was created by him, everything in heaven and on earth, everything seen and unseen, including all forces and powers, and all rulers and authorities. All things were created by God's Son, and everything was made for him. God's Son was before all else, and by him everything is held together.*

COLOSSIANS 1:15-17 (CEV)

One of the greatest contributions of the Celts to the richness of Christian spirituality is that they recognized Christ's immanence in the whole of life. They understood that Christ is not only over all, but that he is in all. His presence suffuses the whole of creation and fills every creative aspect of it.

St Patrick's great prayer recognizes that our connection to the Lord is not only in spiritual devotion, but through every aspect of our lives and even through creation itself. He wrote:

*I bind myself today to the virtue of Heaven,  
In light of sun,  
In brightness of snow,  
In splendour of fire,  
In speed of lightning,  
In swiftness of wind,  
In depth of sea,  
In stability of earth,  
In compactness of rock.*

When I was travelling up to London on a packed commuter train during Advent, a girl next to me took a small camera out of her bag. When the train juddered to a halt at Vauxhall Station, a vast concrete urban sprawl with hardly a tree in sight, she lifted the camera to her eye and took a picture. 'Wow!' she said. 'What a sunrise.'

I hadn't even noticed it. And nor had the scores of other commuters hidden behind their daily papers. I strained to look out of the window, and there, above the grey city skyline, was a broad sweep of spectacular reds, yellows and golds. The Carpenter was at work again.

This Advent, look for him not only in stable and manger, but see him in the beauty of his creation.

*I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.*

*I see his face in every flower;  
The thunder and singing of the birds  
Are but his voice—and carved by his power  
Rocks are his written words.*

*All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
His crown of thorns is twined in every thorn,  
His cross is every tree.*

JOSEPH MARY PLUNKETT (1887-1916)

### **Meditation**

*I am the one called Amen! I am the faithful and true witness and the source of God's creation (Revelation 3:14, CEV).*



## Jesus: Lamb of God

ISAIAH 53:6-8

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,  
each of us has turned to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.  
He was oppressed and afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.  
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.  
And who can speak of his descendants?  
For he was cut off from the land of the living;  
for the transgression of my people he was stricken.

These beautiful words from Isaiah's prophecy are read every year in Advent services around the country; and they echo from town to town in the performances of Handel's famous oratorio *Messiah*. Yet many people have failed to grasp their significance. From time to time I've actually heard churchgoers talking about the death of Jesus as though he was the victim of misfortune, or as if his death was some tragic mistake. Not a bit of it. They need to discover that Jesus is the Lamb of God!

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Isaiah's prophecy recognized that this coming Messiah would come to die sacrificially. He was coming like 'a lamb to the slaughter'. There was no way in which he would avoid the suffering and sacrifice that were to be an integral part of his ministry.

So why do we call Jesus the Lamb of God? We must go back in

Jewish history to the horrendous period in which the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt, and revisit the momentous events that were set in motion when Moses asked Pharaoh to 'let my people go!'

When Pharaoh refused to release the Jews, Moses warned him that all of Egypt's firstborn would die. If the Jewish people wanted to escape this terrible plague themselves, they had to follow his instructions carefully:

*Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the door-frame.'*

EXODUS 12:21-22

The Jews daubed this lamb's blood on the entrances to their homes and in this way they escaped the plague. God's judgment 'passed over' them and so the event was celebrated with a Passover meal. Shortly afterwards, Moses and his people were on their way to freedom.

When Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be the 'Lamb of God', then, he was drawing on the rich imagery of these events. He was tapping into the heart of his nation's spiritual heritage. Isaiah prophesied that God would provide a way in which everyone could escape God's judgment, just as he had provided for the Jews in Egypt so long before! But this time it wouldn't be through the blood of a lamb, but the blood of the coming Messiah.

Isaiah's powerful prophecy was fulfilled in the death on the cross of Jesus Christ the Saviour. This sense of continuity between the Passover lamb and the sacrifice of Jesus can be seen in other ways, too. John tells us, for example, that Jesus was crucified at Passover time. And hyssop, the insignificant wall-plant used to daub the doorposts in the first Passover, came back to prominence again in the moments before Christ's death:

*A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.*



*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

JOHN 19:29-30

Just as the blood of a lamb provided a way of escape from God's impending judgment on Passover night, so the blood of Jesus Christ was God's way out of judgment for all who would believe in him.

What does all this mean in a highly secularized techno-society? What does the whole concept of the 'sacrificial lamb' mean when such practices are alien to our culture and lifestyle? Simply this. Many of us are burning ourselves out with good works and helpful deeds, and chasing our tails in the service of the Church. We're living as though our salvation depends on what we do rather than on what God has done for us.

When the Jews sat in their homes with their bags packed on Passover night, they couldn't do anything to save themselves but trust God's word that the lamb's blood would protect them. Perhaps we, as Christians at the turn of the millennium, need to trust God's word that the blood of the Lamb of God will save us. We need to recognize again that salvation is God's work, not ours. We need to 'trust in the blood of Christ' instead of trusting in our own feeble attempts to earn our salvation and escape his judgment!

The death of the Messiah has an importance of eternal significance. According to the writer of Revelation, it was a sacrifice anticipated from the start of time, for he wrote of 'the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world' (Revelation 13:8).

It's pertinent, then, that right at the start of Jesus' ministry John the Baptist identified him as the one who had come to be a sacrifice. Perhaps this was the most important reason for his arrival! John saw Jesus coming towards him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' (John 1:29).

Advent is a time for coming back to basics. It's a time for re-appraisal. a time for new beginnings. Perhaps it's a time for us to wonder again at the mysterious way in which God has provided for our salvation. Not through power, nor prosperity nor piety... but through a Lamb.

*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

1 PETER 1:18-19

### **Meditation**

*Good Christians all, rejoice  
With heart and soul and voice!  
Now you need not fear the grave;  
Jesus Christ was born to save:  
Calls you one and calls you all,  
To gain his everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save!  
Christ was born to save!*

JOHN MASON NEALE (1818-66)



## Jesus: 'I am'

JOHN 1:15-18 (CEV)

*The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. From him all the kindness and all the truth of God have come down to us. John spoke about him and shouted, 'This is the one I told you would come! He is greater than I am, because he was alive before I was born. Because of all that the Son is, we have been given one blessing after another. The Law was given by Moses, but Jesus Christ brought us undeserved kindness and truth. No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is truly God and is closest to the Father, has shown us what God is like.'*

At the start of John's Gospel the author makes it clear that John the Baptist knew that, although no one has seen God, the one who was to come after him would show us what God is like. If we want to know God, then, we must know Jesus.

There are two little words which give us a deep insight into who Jesus is. In Hebrew they are '*Ani hu*', and in Greek '*Ego eimi*'. They are difficult to translate, however, and although we generally see them interpreted by the phrase 'I am...' this doesn't really convey their full meaning. 'I am he' gives us a better interpretation.

'I am' is the most holy name of God in the Old Testament. There can be no fuller definition of who God is, for he is the beginning and end—and the source of life itself. God's being, existence and life are sufficient definition in themselves.

When Moses saw the burning bush in the Sinai desert and went over to look at it, he heard God's voice calling him by name. He was asked to take off his shoes. It was a holy place because God was there. Unworthy and ill-equipped though he felt, God called him to take the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and to set them free. Moses

asked who it was who was calling him to do this impossible task. 'God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'"' (Exodus 3:14).

Since that time, the Jews revered the term 'I am' as the mysterious name of God. It formed part of the liturgy of the feast of Tabernacles and the Passover, and in the prayers and readings on those great occasions God was constantly referred to as 'I am'.

The Jews were shocked by many of the things that Jesus said and did, but perhaps the thing that shocked them most was his use of the term 'I am' when speaking of himself. It was tantamount to blasphemy. On one occasion, the Jews taunted Jesus about his claims. 'Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?' (John 8:53). But Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!' (John 8:58). At this, his listeners were so angry that they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, and slipped away from the temple grounds.

Jesus wasn't afraid to use the term 'I am', even though he knew how people would react. He frequently used it to reinforce his many claims to divinity: '*I am* the bread of life'; '*I am* the vine; '*I am* the good shepherd; '*I am* the gate; '*I am* the way; '*I am* the light of the world; '*I am* the resurrection and the life; '*I am* the first and the last.'

When he spoke to the woman of Samaria, she wondered if he could be the Messiah. In reply he told her, 'I am, I the one who is speaking to you' (John 4:26). When the storm got up on Galilee and Jesus walked on the water towards his terrified disciples in the boat, he said, 'Take heart. I am' (Matthew 14:27). When he was being tried in Jerusalem, the chief priests demanded to know if he claimed to be the Messiah, and Jesus replied 'I am' (Mark 14:62). And on that last night with his disciples, at the breaking of bread and the pouring of wine, he explained what was to happen so that 'you may believe that I am' (John 13:19).

Little wonder, then, that Rousseau once wrote, 'What sublimity in his maxims! What profound wisdom in his discourses! What presence of mind, what ingenuity of justice in his replies! Yes, if the life and death of Socrates are those of a philosopher, the life and death of Jesus are those of a God' (*The Confessions of J.J. Rousseau*, Penguin, 1953).

Many people can accept that Jesus was a great teacher, a great



healer and a great man. Yet to true Christians everywhere he is far more than this. They believe in Jesus the 'I am', who is God incarnate. C.S. Lewis, the Oxford professor, recognized that the struggle to identify who Jesus is lies at the very heart of Christian faith. Once we discover that Jesus is God, truly divine, we discover who God is and what God is like. Lewis once wrote, 'Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse' (*Mere Christianity*, Fount, p. 43).

I used to believe in God as some vague cloud of power—mysterious; unknowable; distant. But when I discovered who Jesus was, I discovered the true God—'I am'. One of the great joys of the Advent season is that, as we welcome Jesus among us, we welcome God. As we worship Jesus, we are drawn into the presence of God. As we come to know Jesus, we come to know the God who is the mysterious 'I am'.

Michael Green once wrote:

*When Jesus says 'I am', he means, 'Where I am, there is God. Where I teach, there God teaches. Where I act, God acts. Where I promise, God promises. Where I suffer and die, God suffers and dies.' It is impossible to imagine any claim more challenging. You can only say 'Yes' in adoring worship, or 'No' in fierce rejection of such a claim.*

WHO IS THIS JESUS? HODDER & STOUGHTON, 1990

### Meditation

See the eternal Son of God,  
A mortal son of man,  
Dwelling in an earthly clod,  
Whom heaven cannot contain!  
Stand amazed, ye heavens, at this!  
See the Lord of earth and skies;  
Humbled to the dust he is,  
And in a manger lies.

CHARLES WESLEY (1707–88)

## Jesus: the True Vine

ISAIAH 11:1–3

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of power,  
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord—  
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

Over the years my family and I have spent several wonderful Christmases on my friend's farm. The village life, the farmyard noises and routine, and the local worship in the chapel next door have made these times very special and memorable for us as a family.

Every year, just before Christmas, my friend would stagger through the kitchen doorway with a cluster of branches from the holly bush in his field. They'd be grandly displayed in the lounge beside the fireplace, and would dominate the whole room over the festive season.

The fresh smell of the holly filled the whole house, and it seemed more fitting than the plastic Christmas trees that so many of us put up year after year. By the end of the Christmas season, however, the holly always looked dry and lifeless. The shining sparkle on the leaves had gone. Two weeks of being roasted beside a log fire didn't do it much good! By Twelfth Night, the holly branches were thrown out, shrivelled and dead.

In order to understand today's theme, we need to keep these two pictures of the holly branch in our mind—the fresh green leaves as they came through the kitchen door at the start of Christmas, and the dry, dead branches carried out on Twelfth Night.



The Jews had been given every opportunity to remain in the flow of God's life-giving Spirit. If they'd been obedient and faithful, they might have continued to blossom and be fruitful in God's service... but pride and sin had got in the way. God had broken them off from his rich source of life. They had become a people fit only for the bonfire, like holly on Twelfth Night.

The prophet Isaiah had foretold that a time would come when a new shoot would begin to appear from the old tree. This new shoot would become a branch in its own right and would carry God's life-giving Spirit to a new generation. When Paul looked back, centuries later, he could see that this prophecy had been fulfilled in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Through his coming, countless millions had been grafted into the old tree.

Paul warned the Gentiles, however, that they must beware of pride. Just because the Jews had been lopped off like a dead branch, the Gentiles were not to consider themselves as superior. If they did, they might also lose the precious new relationship that they had found by being 'grafted in' to the old tree through Jesus Christ:

*If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you.*

ROMANS 11:17-18

It's against this background, then, that Jesus made his powerful claim to divinity through the words, 'I am the true vine.' Those who wanted to receive the Father's life-giving Spirit had to be joined intimately to him. Those who felt they could get along without him were destined for fruitlessness and death. Jesus said:

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.*

JOHN 15:1-2, 5

If, at this early point in Advent, you are already gathering in the holly and the mistletoe to decorate your home, if you are returning home triumphant with your fresh-grown Christmas tree... beware! These beautiful symbols of evergreen, of life and of natural beauty, have already begun to die. Soon the berries will have fallen, the leaves will have dried out and the pine needles will be scattered over the living-room carpet!

So let's make this the time of year when we re-examine our connection to Jesus Christ, the only source of God's nourishing, fruit-giving, life-empowering Spirit. Let's make it a time to remember that unless we are in Christ and he is in us, we can never be truly fruitful or truly alive. If we are cut off from him we can only await the time when, dried out and lifeless, we are cast out like dead Christmas trimmings.

The famous preacher Leslie D. Weatherhead believed that this passage was relevant for the whole of society, as well as for each individual within it. He pointed out that fourteen of the twenty-one great civilizations that have blossomed on earth are now of interest only to the archaeologist.

More than forty years ago, Weatherhead pondered the possibility that the great cultures of Europe and America might soon become instruments which God could no longer use, and which would be thrown away as useless, like the civilizations of Egypt and Babylon. But Weatherhead also saw this claim of Jesus as a profound and powerful challenge to every believing Christian. Many of us are drawn to use our own initiative, our own resources or our own ambition to make progress in our lives. Ultimately, however, we can be fruitful as Christians only through receiving the love, grace and strength that God wants to pour into us day by day. Weatherhead once wrote:

*The message of Christ is that though my nature be wilder than the wild vine, and all the fruit of it so far be little grapes that are no more than wild and bitter berries—all stone and skin at that—I can be incorporated into the True Vine, and the life of God can stir within me and transform my life from within.*

OVER HIS OWN SIGNATURE, EPWORTH PRESS, 1955



This Advent, get connected to the Source—Jesus Christ!

### Prayer

O God our Father,  
who dost exhort us to pray,  
and who dost grant what we ask,  
if only, when we ask,  
we live a better life;  
hear me,  
who am trembling in this darkness,  
and stretch forth Thy hand unto me;  
hold forth Thy light before me;  
recall me from my wanderings;  
and, Thou being my Guide,  
may I be restored to myself and to Thee,  
through Jesus Christ.

Amen

A PRAYER OF AUGUSTINE (354–430)

FRIDAY OF WEEK ONE

## Jesus: the Messiah

JOHN 4:25–26

*The woman at the well said, 'I know that Messiah... is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I who speak to you am he.'*

Zechariah belonged to the eighth order of the twenty-four orders of priests, the order of Abijah. Part of the privilege of holding that office was that twice every year he went to help administer the morning and evening sacrifice at the temple.

One day, when Zechariah was on duty in the temple, he fulfilled a lifelong ambition. He was chosen by lot, according to the priestly tradition, to participate in the most coveted task of all—to burn incense in the temple itself.

As he burnt the incense that day, the plume of white smoke was a powerful reminder of the prayers of the people rising heavenward toward God. It symbolized the heart-cry for the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah.

It was very significant, then, that this was the precise moment when the angel came to tell Zechariah about the imminent arrival of the Messiah. Zechariah learnt that he would soon be the father of the one who would prepare the way for it all. Zechariah's new son, John, would call the people to repent and get them ready for the Messiah's arrival.

Zechariah doubted the validity of the angel's words and was quite literally 'struck dumb' until John was born. At John's naming ceremony, Zechariah was suddenly able to speak again, and his first words formed a prophecy which unpacked the profound meaning of the Messiah's coming.

The term 'Messiah' was first used in Israel to describe anyone



who was anointed with holy oil. The kings of Israel were consecrated by anointing in this way. Then Messiah was extended to describe the Anointed One whose coming to redeem Israel was foretold by the prophets. Zechariah's prophecy drew together much of this thinking:

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come and has redeemed his people.  
He has raised up a horn of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David  
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),  
salvation from our enemies  
and from the hand of all who hate us—  
to show mercy to our fathers  
and to remember his holy covenant,  
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:  
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,  
and to enable us to serve him without fear  
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

LUKE 1:68-75

Zechariah's long years as a priest and his lifetime of experience in the temple make this prophecy all the more remarkable. The prophecy demonstrated that the Messiah would fulfil three great hopes of the people of Israel.

- **First, that God would 'come'.** The word he used for 'come' (v. 68) was a military term, used when a captain visited his troops. The long-expected Messiah was to be just this—God, coming on earth to see things for himself, first-hand.
- **Second, that God would 'save'.** The horn (v. 69) is the strongest part of an animal: it's used for attack and defence and is at the core of the animal's activity. The Messiah is the 'horn of salvation' and uses the axis of God's strength in his life and ministry. The long-expected Messiah would save the people.
- **Third, that God would 'remember' (v. 72).** The Messiah was a symbol of God's ancient promises to Abraham, and of the covenant he had made with the people of Israel. The Messiah's

arrival was a sign that God had not forgotten, nor had he stopped loving his people Israel.

Millions of Jews around the world still await this promised Messiah. They are still looking for God to 'come', to 'save' and to 'remember'. They have not yet discovered that the prophecy of Zechariah, a priest of Abijah, heralded the end of all those centuries of waiting.

Some contemporary Jews have discovered for themselves that Jesus is the Messiah. They can draw on the riches of their Hebrew heritage to understand it more fully. Helen Shapiro comes from a Jewish background in the East End of London, and topped the charts with her famous song 'Walking back to happiness' when she was still very young. The pressures of stardom and the transience of the pop world took their toll on her life. At last, through the witness of her agent, Helen discovered Jesus as her Messiah. It was an event which changed the direction of her whole life and career.

Helen now travels around the world singing about Jesus the Messiah, and explaining how she discovered that those ancient prophecies were fulfilled in Christ's coming to earth and in his saving work on the cross.

Many of us have failed to grasp the richness of what it means to know Jesus as the Messiah. We have yet to discover him as the fulfilment of centuries of dreams, the culmination of a nation's prophetic hope.

This Advent, let's see Jesus not just as the man for now, but as the one who fulfils centuries of prophecy—the long-awaited one, the person whose ministry reaches backwards through history as well as forwards through time.

I believe that many in our secular society still look for someone to change the world, for someone who will fulfil their hopes and dreams. The good news is that the search is over. Christ is come!

### Prayer

*Lord Jesus,  
I have many hopes and dreams.  
Help them to be placed at your feet,  
And may I see their fulfilment  
In your purposes, not my own.*



## Jesus: the Cornerstone

EPHESIANS 2:20-22 (CEV)

*You are like a building with the apostles and prophets as the foundation and with Christ as the most important stone. Christ is the one who holds the building together and makes it grow into a holy temple for the Lord. And you are part of that building Christ has built as a place for God's own Spirit to live.*

Imagine a building-site. The site foreman picks up a stone, smirks, and tosses it to one side. He considers it useless and rejects it. It's a stone considered worthless—a stone fit only for the scrap-heap.

A couple of years ago, I went on holiday to a French mountain farmhouse. It was a spectacular mountain hideaway, only reached by a steep and winding track full of pot-holes. When at last I reached the driveway and looked at the house, I was fascinated by what I saw.

The whole building was constructed around a massive rocky outcrop. The rock that the builders must have originally looked on as an obstacle had become the cornerstone for the whole building. The villa's security and stability depended on this huge old lump of rock. The stone that must have seemed to be in the way had become the most important stone. What was originally seen as nothing had become everything. What was first looked on as useless had become the most useful stone of all. Peter wrote:

*Come to Jesus Christ. He is the living stone that people have rejected, but which God has chosen and highly honoured. And now you are living stones that are being used to build a spiritual house... Look! I am placing in Zion a choice and precious cornerstone. No one who has faith in that one will be disappointed.*

1 PETER 2:4-6 (CEV)

The stone considered worthless has become priceless. The stone they wanted to dispose of is the most prestigious stone of all. In removing this stone, we remove the head of the corner. In casting it out, we endanger the whole structure. He is the cornerstone of the universe, the secure foundation in a shaking civilization. If we toss him aside, we lose the one building-block that is totally indispensable.

Jesus once went back to his old home town of Nazareth—back to the carpenter's shop, back to his mother and brothers and the small close-knit community in which he'd been reared. He might have expected a hero's welcome or hoped they might put the flags out. Perhaps they might have held a welcome home party or made a fuss of him. Not a bit of it. In Nazareth he met a wall of resistance. They were so bitter that some of them even tried to kill him. He was rejected.

Another time, Jesus went to a party at Simon's house. Simon was a Pharisee, a popular guy in town. But Simon hadn't invited Jesus to honour him, to welcome him or to affirm him. He'd invited Jesus to humiliate him. There was no kiss of welcome, no ceremonial washing bowl, no neatly folded towel—just a wall of cynicism. Simon and his guests humiliated Jesus. He was rejected.

Later, Jesus was praying in a quiet garden called Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, overlooking Jerusalem. It was beyond the chatter and bustle of the town, a good place to pray. That night, some guards came to arrest him, part of a plot to assassinate him and to discredit him. Jesus met a wall of hostility. But perhaps the cruellest cut of all was that he was identified by a kiss and betrayed by one of his closest companions. He was rejected.

Over and over again, the life of Jesus was a story of living in the margin. He was born in a borrowed stable and buried in a borrowed tomb, and between the two he knew what it was to face a wall of rejection. At last, they hung him on a cross, plunged a spear into his side, and played dice for his clothes. They killed him on the city rubbish dump. The world has continued to reject him ever since.

In our secular society, that rejection is more poignant and more painful than ever. And, as we look back over another year, many of us must face up to the fact that we've rejected him, too. This Advent, ask yourself, have you rejected the cornerstone? The mountain of love on which the world is built?



## Prayer

*Sometimes, Lord,*

*I feel that I'm building with straw.*

*Constructing my life from flimsy notions,*

*Securing it within the framework of public opinion,*

*Designing it with fashionable ideas,*

*Papering it with passing fashions,*

*Cementing my building blocks of prejudice... into pride of place.*

*Help me, Lord,*

*To find you,*

*And make you my Cornerstone.*

## Week Two

# JESUS—IN THE DARK DAYS

This week we will explore how Jesus, the Word of Life, can bring light, hope and love—even into our darkest days.



## Jesus: the Word

JOHN 1:1-2, 14

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

In many churches and chapels, the second Sunday of Advent is a very special time. The Advent ring is brought out and dusted off, and the first Advent candle is lit. Traditionally, in many churches, this is known as Bible Sunday. It's the day when many preachers make the connection between Jesus the Word of life and his presence in the word of God, the Bible.

Perhaps it's a connection that we don't make as easily as once we did. There are so many translations, popular paraphrases and versions of the Bible available to us today that, for many of us, the Bible has become a book like any other. Different-coloured cover jackets, glossy illustrations and forewords by famous personalities have done a lot to popularize the Bible. But, in so doing, perhaps we've lost something of its mystery along the way.

There was a time when all Bibles had hardbound black covers, and clearly bore in bold, gold script on the front cover the word 'Holy'. Each Bible had an aura of being 'special' and people generally treated it with respect. Sadly, although there are still lots of Bibles around, many of them go completely unread. Bible Society statistics tell us that although 57 per cent of the adult population claim to own a Bible personally, the vast majority haven't opened it at any time during the last year.

Detailed surveys tell us that 31.2 million people in Britain have a

Bible in their homes. There are approximately 37.3 million Bibles filling the bookshelves and cupboards of British homes. That's an awful lot of books!

Let's put that in perspective. The new British Library, opened in November 1998 by the Queen, is massive. It fills a whole block near St Pancras station. It boasts a total collection of a staggering 18 million books! But that's less than *half* the number of Bibles which are lying around and gathering dust all over the country.

You'd think it would be a different story in the Church, where we declare that the Bible is our guide for life, our rule of faith and our source of comfort. But our declarations make us look like hypocrites. Many of us are kidding ourselves if we say that the Bible is important and vital to our spiritual well-being. The truth is that two-thirds of regular churchgoers don't open the Bible at any time during the week. So look around your church on Sunday when everyone is sitting, Bible open, and looking piously at the scriptures. That's the only time that most of them will glance at it till next Sunday!

According to a detailed survey by Bible Society, a staggering one in six regular churchgoers have never read anything from the Bible *at any time* in their lives.

If the Bible is our supreme rule of faith, if we claim that it is the word of God and that it can speak to us in poignant and relevant ways, why don't we read it? Is it unapproachable? Perhaps the thought of 66 books under one cover is too much to take! Or is the language too unreadable? Or don't we think it's important? Or are we just too darn lazy to open the covers?

Statistics tell us that only around one in five regular churchgoers has read the whole Bible during their lives. Others, I suppose, have just read the juicy bits or those parts that are easier to understand.

I find these statistics alarming. It's time that all of us in church leadership woke up to this creeping tide of ignorance that is engulfing the Church.

How can the Church engage in mission if it doesn't know the story? How can we love Jesus if we don't understand who he is? How can we live Christian lives if we don't grapple with the standards laid out for us in scripture? What kind of church is emerging if it's made



up of a Christian community that doesn't read the Bible? It will soon be wrecked and rudderless!

Perhaps in the last few years we've become so 'experience focused' and contemporary in our mission that we've lost one of God's greatest gifts to us, his word.

Paul wrote to the young emerging leader Timothy, 'All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

We could start by asking the people in our church to be real. Let's shut down this pious hypocrisy and tell each other why Bible reading's such a struggle—and let's begin a quiet revolution that focuses on the relevance of the word of God for our lives, today.

Perhaps we need to recover part of our theology and discover again that one of the most fruitful ways of meeting Jesus the Word is through the Bible, the word of God. It's when we wrestle with the truths of the Bible that we move beyond the words to meet the Word himself. The Word, who became flesh at Christmas, is God's communication. He not only *is* the Word, but he *has* a word for each of us in every situation.

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*

1 JOHN 1:1-4

One thing's for sure... a Bible-illiterate church is a community headed for heresy, a people destined for moral disaster, a fellowship bound for breakdown.

Let's become a people who meet Jesus in the word—and who find strength there to face whatever dark days may come.

## Prayer

*Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen*

COLLECT FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT, BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER



## Jesus: the Redeemer

ROMANS 8:28

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purposes.*

Zechariah was a prophet and, like all genuine prophets, was able to move backwards and forwards throughout time to see what was, what is, and what is to be. He was certainly having an 'off day' when the angel came to tell him that his wife would soon give birth to a son, John the Baptist. He just couldn't believe it! And, because of his unbelief, he was struck dumb! (Luke 1:11-20).

On the eighth day after John was born, everyone wanted to know what the child was to be called. Zechariah trusted the Lord on this occasion, and wrote on a chalkboard that his newborn son's name was to be John. At that moment his tongue was loosed and he could speak again (Luke 1:59-64).

Anyone who's had laryngitis for any length of time will know what a joy it is to speak again! The first thing that Zechariah spoke was a prophecy—a look backwards from the future, a divine message under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He said, 'Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people' (Luke 1:68).

Looking at the imminent birth of the Messiah, Zechariah saw that Jesus was coming as a redeemer. It was a concept that was very familiar to the Jews. When they were in captivity in Egypt, treated as slaves, oppressed, poor and broken, they cried out to God for a redeemer—someone who would set them free! God heard their prayer and answered it faithfully:

*'I will free you from being slaves to the Egyptians, and I will*

*redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.'*

EXODUS 6:6-7

Through the ministry of Moses, and the parting of the waters of the Red Sea, the people of Israel were redeemed. They were taken out of one situation and brought, eventually, to somewhere far better—the promised land.

Zechariah could see that Jesus was coming on earth to be a redeemer—to bring us out of one situation, and to place us somewhere far better; to buy us out of captivity, and to give us liberty; to release us from our chains and to set us free.

Jesus redeems us when we allow him to take over our lives and to push out sin's domination and ownership. He redeems us from slavery to our past, our failure, our sinfulness and our selfishness, and, quite literally, he sets us free.

But that's not all. His activity in our lives day by day, and year on year, is an ongoing work of redemption. He takes our scars, the wounds that go deep into our past, the hurts, the disappointments, the regrets, the dark shadows that haunt us down the years and, quite literally, he redeems them—if we'll let him.

Keir Tayler was a sergeant in the fierce Rhodesian fighting force called the Selous Scouts. He fired an AK47, and was a member of a crack fighting unit in some of the bloodiest and most horrifying conflicts of the bush war.

One day, in a massive gun battle in which the eighty members of his squad were surrounded by several thousand enemy troops, he was shot and lay bleeding in the back of an army truck. He cried out, 'God, if you want my life now, you can have it, because you gave it to me.' It was a moment of despair, the cry of a dying man.

But God saved him, and it was a miracle. Keir Tayler is now a member of a different force, and he's fighting a different battle. He goes into some of the most impenetrable areas of the bush to take the love of Christ into some of the most impoverished and inaccessible areas in the world. He uses the skills of tracking, bush survival and orienteering that he learnt in the Selous Scouts to find his way



through impenetrable tracts of land in the service of the gospel and for the good of humanity. It's a picture of redemption, of Jesus taking what is, and shaping it into something different, better, right.

Many people quote Romans 8:28, 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose', as though God waves a magic wand over our lives and makes them all better. The work of redemption isn't quite so easy. It's a partnership between Jesus the redeemer and us. It's allowing him to take the misshapen clay of our lives so that he can redeem it into something new, something better, something beautiful.

### Prayer

*My Redeemer,  
I give you the scars,  
The wounds that go so deep,  
The hurts, the disappointments, the regrets,  
The dark shadows that haunt me down the years,  
The lifetime of longing.  
And I ask you to work with them.  
Redeem them.  
Make something perfect out of imperfection,  
Beauty from ugliness,  
And work it all together for good.*

## Jesus: the Light of the World

JOHN 8:12

*When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.'*

For me, one of the most difficult aspects of life during Advent is the darkness. There are some days when the streets are dark when I'm on my way to work and dark again when I'm on my way home. I'm sure it has a debilitating effect on me and on everyone else.

Recent research indicates that darkness can lead to people feeling low. Seasonal Affective Disorder can cause the onset of major depression in the autumn, with symptoms abating in early spring. The frequency of SAD seems to vary with geographic location and to be most prevalent in those areas of the world which are darkest.

Whenever I feel fed up with the long hours of darkness in London, I try to spare a thought for my friends in Shetland who only have one hour of daylight in the middle of winter! My friends on that beautiful island tell me that there can be a feeling of gloom among many in the population at this time of year. In the wild wintry storms, some Shetlanders feel as if the sun will never shine again!

There are some human experiences which can make the world seem very dark indeed. Many people around us can't see any light in the darkness of their circumstances. Their feelings may stem from bereavement, from broken relationships, from experiences of abuse or feelings of despair. But however these feelings may be caused, the end result is just the same. It seems like there'll never be another dawn.

It's really difficult to receive help from others if we're full of inner darkness. No one's words seem quite adequate and no one's deeds



seem quite appropriate. It can be a desolate human experience. In such dark days, it's hard to believe that it will ever be daybreak again.

A young mother called Stevi was suffering from terminal cancer. With four growing kids and a future to plan for, it just didn't seem fair. This, indeed, was a dark human experience. Yet Stevi recognized that even in that dark place, there was a glimmer of light. The presence of Jesus Christ was real for her even in her darkest hour.

The lighting of the final Advent candle on Christmas Day is always a joyous occasion. After all the weeks of waiting, we can now celebrate that Jesus is come, the Light of the world. Graham Kendrick has set this theme to music, and I've heard it sung in many different languages and styles around the world!

*Shine, Jesus, shine,  
Fill this land with the Father's glory;  
Blaze, Spirit, blaze,  
Set our hearts on fire.  
Flow, rivers, flow,  
Flood the nations with grace and mercy;  
Send forth your word,  
Lord, and let there be light.*

If you are living in dark days personally, may I suggest that you simply light an Advent candle and spend some time reflecting on it in a darkened room? Look at the way the flame moves. Watch its bright glow. See its effect on the darkness around it. Watch the flickering shadows it casts—the light in a dark place.

This is the Advent message, that no matter how dark and desolate we may feel, the love and grace of Jesus continue to burn like a small candle in a darkened room. And we need never fear because, even in our darkest hour, the darkness can never put that light out.

*Everything was created through him; nothing—not one thing!—came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.*

JOHN 1:3-5 (THE MESSAGE)

When we receive this light into our lives and enter a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, we are transformed. Even in the darkest situations, there is always a glimmer of light.

Late one Christmas Eve, I attended a beautiful watch-night service in a little snow-covered church in Lauterbrunnen in Switzerland. The church was packed to capacity, and though I didn't understand a word of the service, which was all in German, I did sense the presence of Christ in a beautiful way.

At the end of the service, the preacher lit a large white candle and placed it by the church door. As we left the church in the opening minutes of Christmas Day, each member of the congregation was given a candle to light from the Advent candle. As the congregation trudged out of the chapel through the deep snow, the bells pealed, their echo reverberating around the snow-covered Alps on every side.

I stood in the village high street and gazed in amazement as the hundreds of candles moved around the village streets and up the steep, snowcapped hills. The Light had come into our lives again, and we were taking him out into the world with us.

*'You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.'*

MATTHEW 5:14-16

### Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ,  
Light of the world,  
Shine on me, shine on me.  
Fill my life with your grace and mercy,  
That I might carry your light  
Into the dark places of a hurting world.  
Amen*



## Jesus: the Resurrection and the Life

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-26

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Many of us find the dark days of November and December some of the most depressing in the year. Year after year, the young people in the 'gap year' programme that I lead find November the hardest month of all.

Sometimes it seems as if the darkness of the world outside penetrates our inner being, and all seems doom and gloom. The forces of pessimism and despair are some of the most deadly weapons in the Enemy's armoury.

The message of Advent comes just at the right time! It's a solemn reminder that Jesus Christ is working his purposes out, and that he is already victorious. Indeed, Christ's victory over death and darkness is an important aspect of the Advent message.

Several years ago, when I visited the beautiful 'Garden Tomb' in Jerusalem, I joined the queue to walk into the dark little grave. An American tourist pushed in front of me and said to the guide at the entrance, 'I've only got a couple of minutes; what is there to see here?' The guide smiled, 'Don't waste your time looking in this tomb. He's not here, he's risen!'

Sometimes I regret that we don't preach the risen Jesus more often, even during Advent. Many preachers focus on the resurrection only at Easter, but as committed Christians we need to live in the joy, light and power of the resurrection every day of our lives! Christ's victorious power is one of the most important strands of the Advent season.

There were three poignant symbols in evidence when they buried Jesus. There was the tomb itself, a symbol of death, mortality and human fragility. Jesus was dead and—in the eyes of the world—finished. There was the seal, a symbol of corrupt and evil authority, for his show-trial had been manipulated by wicked men. There was the soldier, a symbol of the suffering, torture and pain to which he had been subjected.

Yet on Easter morning he burst free. He left the tomb empty, for he had overcome the power of death. He broke the seal, for he had defeated the power of evil. The soldiers ran away, for he had overcome the power of suffering.

Part of the Advent message is that we enter into Christ's victory, and claim it personally in whatever circumstances we might find ourselves. Advent is a powerful reminder, in the dark days of winter, that we should live in the joy of his resurrection power no matter what we face!

We should know it in suffering. When Canon David Watson was very ill and dying of cancer, he wrote, 'The words "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again" should not be mumbled—but shouted with ringing confidence. It's the greatest good news that we could ever know on this earth—whatever may happen—the best is yet to be...!' (*Fear No Evil*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1984)

We should know it when facing evil. When Corrie ten Boom was imprisoned in Ravensbrück concentration camp, and facing the powers of evil head-on, she gathered other prisoners together for Bible study.

*Like waifs we clustered around a blazing fire as we gathered around the Bible—holding out our hands to its warmth and light. The blacker the night around us grew, the brighter and more beautiful burned the Word of God as we read... 'In all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us...'*



We should know it when we face death. When my mother died, we buried her in her little Cotswold home village of Hook Norton. It was a deeply moving occasion, with people coming from many parts of the country to pay their last respects. As the coffin was carried down the village street from the chapel to the graveyard, someone struck up an old gospel hymn, and soon everyone was singing, 'We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. We're marching onward to Zion, the beautiful City of God.' Through the power of the risen Christ, we have the victory, even in death itself.

We should know this resurrection life as part of our everyday experience. It should infuse us with hope and joy in the dreariest tasks and the dullest days; and enable us to see that whatever struggles we face here on earth, we can face them in the strength of One who has gone before and whose victory is already certain.

When I was a young teenager in Birmingham. I used to hear stories of the great preacher in that city called Dr R.W. Dale. Once, when he was preparing his sermons for Easter Day, the truth of the resurrection suddenly dawned on him. From that time on, whenever he conducted a service—even during Advent and Christmas—he always included at least one hymn which proclaimed the resurrection message! He described this experience in his diary:

*'Christ is alive,' I said to myself: 'alive!' And then I paused: 'Alive!' And then I paused again: 'Alive!' Can that really be true? Living as really as I myself am? I got up and walked about repeating: 'Christ is living! Christ is living!' At first it seemed strange and hardly true, but at last it came upon me as a burst of sudden glory; yes, Christ is alive. It was to me a new discovery. I thought that all along I had believed it; but not until that moment did I feel sure about it. I then said, 'My people shall know it. I shall preach it again and again until they believe it as I do now.'*

A.W. DALE, *LIFE OF R.W. DALE OF BIRMINGHAM*, HODDER & STOUGHTON, 1899, p. 642

Cecil Frances Alexander, the hymnwriter, was able to combine the great messages of Advent and Easter in one hymn—'Once in Royal David's City'. Today, during this Advent season, don't forget that you're one of the Easter people!

## Meditation

*And our eyes at last shall see him,  
Through his own redeeming love,  
For that child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in heaven above;  
And he leads his children on  
To the place where he is gone.*

*Not in that poor lowly stable,  
With the oxen standing by,  
We shall see him; but in heaven,  
Set at God's right hand on high;  
When like stars his children crowned  
All in white shall wait around.*

CECIL FRANCES ALEXANDER (1818–95)



## Jesus: the Victor

1 CORINTHIANS 15:54-58

*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'*

*'Where, O death, is your victory?  
Where, O death, is your sting?'*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

There's a great deal of talk of the power of evil these days, and a few weeks ago many of our friends and neighbours were taking part in that strange old festival of Hallowe'en. Sadly, it seems to have taken on a new popularity in recent years. There are so many things to celebrate, so it's disappointing that people have decided to celebrate the power of evil.

The festival has its origins in ancient New Year festivals and festivals of the dead. Bonfires were lit to frighten away the spirits of the night, and nuts were thrown into the fires to make loud explosions that might ward off the evil spirits. Many villagers covered themselves with soot so that they might be invisible to the dark powers of the night. Lighted pumpkins were placed around villages as markers of territory beyond which the Evil One might not trespass.

Essentially, however, it was a festival of fear—fear of the devil and all his works. And that's what thousands of children are participating in by dressing up as witches and stalking people by night. It's a

celebration of evil which builds a culture of fear around the dark powers of the devil.

Advent is not a festival of fear, it's a festival of expectation, preparedness and of eager anticipation about the coming of the Saviour. It's a festival of hope!

Advent is a time to recognize that Christ came to wage war on the dark forces of evil, and that—although that victory is already won—we can look forward to a day when we will all share in the completion of it ourselves.

In the days of the Roman empire, the Roman army celebrated a great victory by forming a procession through a newly captured city or province. The ragged remnant of the defeated army would be dragged in chains down the streets as a symbol of their powerlessness and humiliation. Paul saw the resurrection as Christ's victory procession. The devil was humiliated at last. Jesus had made a 'public spectacle of the spiritual rulers and authorities by leading them as captives in his victory procession' (Colossians 2:15, GNB).

Several years ago, my friend's father died. Some days later, a gas bill arrived, and my friend contacted the gas company to explain her bereavement. She assured them that the bill would be settled after Probate. A few days later, another bill arrived, and my friend repeated her explanation. Again... a bill. Again... the explanation. Until, at last, a Court order arrived, and my friend contacted the gas company with the plot number and the cemetery address, suggesting that they take the matter up with the deceased! But, of course, the company had no power over the deceased, for he was way beyond their authority or jurisdiction.

In the same way, when we were joined to Christ, we died to the power and authority of evil, and were given the strength to live a new life which is pleasing to God:

*We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*

ROMANS 6:4-5



I sometimes meet Christians who haven't discovered this victory. They seem to bear all the hallmarks of a people who are defeated, demoralized and disheartened. It's as though the power of evil had won the victory, and as if Jesus had not risen from the dead.

Advent is a time for knowing that victory for ourselves! It's a time for sorting ourselves out with God, and for looking at those areas of our lives that we know are displeasing to him. It's a specific season in the year when we can watch and pray, and make the changes in our behaviour and attitudes which we know really need to be made. It's a time for shunning the devil and all his works, and for turning our lives over to Christ with a new submission and surrender.

A couple of years ago, there was a strange report in my local Wimbledon newspaper. A masked gunman entered a local post office to stage a hold-up. The terrified clerk had his hands held high as the robber stuffed the money into a hold-all.

A retired man, however, was waiting to collect his pension by the counter. He was so outraged at what he saw that he shouted at the gunman, and chased him out of the post office and down the road until the thief dropped his bag of money. The police commended the elderly man for his courage, but warned other citizens against following his example.

James wrote, 'Submit to God. Resist the Devil, and he will run away from you' (James 4:7, GNB). And that is my advice to you today. In these special days of Advent, remember that the powers of evil are nothing to be scared of. Christ has already won the victory, and by living in him and by drawing on this power, we can surely win the victory.

In these days before Christmas, let's resist the devil and all his temptations, testings and taunts. Let's inhabit the victory of Jesus!

### Prayer

*Open our eyes wide, Lord,  
To see the way ahead:  
the dark dangers,  
the hair-pin bends,  
the hidden junctions,  
the unexpected pitfalls  
On this narrow road.*

*Open our eyes wide, Lord,  
To see the way ahead:  
the route to glory,  
the path to heaven,  
the road to holiness,  
the track to sacrifice  
On this narrow road.*

*Open our eyes wide, Lord,  
To see the way ahead:  
deflect us from traps,  
direct us from snares,  
drive us through testings,  
steer us past seductions,  
turn us from temptations  
On this narrow road.*

*Open our eyes wide  
To see the way ahead:  
And lead us not into temptation  
But deliver us from evil  
On this narrow road.*



## Jesus: Son of Man

MATTHEW 25:31-33

*'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.'*

The Advent season reminds us that, at the end of time, the Son of Man will return as Judge and King. The title Son of Man appears about 82 times in the New Testament, and 81 of them appear in the Gospels. It is a title that Jesus invariably used of himself. It is, therefore, his chosen name for himself and one that we must therefore take very seriously.

Scholars have debated at great length why Jesus chose this title, and what it really means. Some feel that he chose 'Son of Man' to emphasize the human aspect of his nature, and that when he used 'Son of God' he was referring to the divine part of his being. But the weakness in this argument is that Jesus was a whole person, not a split personality!

The most credible thesis is that Jesus searched for a title that would communicate most about who he was and why he had come. Other scholars, therefore, feel that Jesus took a title that was known and recognizable to his hearers, but that he used it in a new, shocking and startling way!

They propose that the origin of the title 'Son of Man' is from Daniel 7:

*I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of*

*Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him'*

DANIEL 7:13-14 (RSV)

Daniel saw that the previous age was 'bestial', but the new age—the messianic age—would be like a 'son of man'. Jesus, therefore, represented this new age of gentleness, whose empire would be in stark contrast to the military regimes and imperial movements of the previous age.

William Barclay, however, believed that Jesus was also drawing from the imagery of the apocryphal book of Enoch (chs. 46, 48, 62, 63, 69 and 70). In this book we see the Son of Man as majestic glory, the stern and inevitable judgment, and the terrifying entry of divine majesty into a rebellious and sinful world. Barclay believed that the genius of Jesus was to take Enoch's vision of power and judgment, and to use the term to introduce statements about his sufferings and death:

*To anyone who knew the orthodox, conventional and traditional idea and picture of the Son of Man, such sayings were bound to appear incredible and intolerable, impossible contradictions in terms. What had the majestic, divine glory of the Son of Man to do with humiliation and rejection? What had the irresistible might and triumph of the Son of Man to do with death on a cross? Statements like these about the Son of Man would leave the hearers shocked, incredulous, and quite unable to understand.*

THE GOSPELS AND ACTS, SCM PRESS, 1976

Jesus took this title of 'Son of Man' and reinvented it. He interpreted it in a new and shocking way. In the new way that Jesus used it 'Son of Man' became a title which contained within it weakness and strength, shame and glory, defeat and victory.

Jesus used the term to point to his humiliation, judgment and crucifixion—and to remind his followers that, ultimately, victory would be his. Only on the day of his resurrection could they have begun to understand why he saw himself as the Son of Man.



When we come to know Jesus as the 'Son of Man', therefore, we come to know him in his gentleness and his judgment, in his suffering and his victory, in his weakness and his strength. This Jesus can transform our lives!

Dave Markee is a name that not many know. But he was one of the most famous session men in the record business of the 1970s and early 1980s. He was a musician whose playing graced dozens of major hits. He played with most of the great bands of that era, recording in Los Angeles, the Bahamas and London.

Seated on a beach in the Bahamas, following an exhausting few days of session work, Dave met a famous rock musician called Bryn Haworth. Bryn told Dave that he needn't feel lost any more. He needn't run any more. If he turned his life over to Jesus, he could have a new beginning.

Dave Markee now runs one of the largest Christian fellowships in Croydon. He told me that when he sat on the beach with Bryn that day he didn't feel emotional, or spiritual: 'There were two paths stretching out before me... and I chose the harder.' That way was the Jesus way, the Jesus road, the Jesus path—the narrow road to eternal life. He knew it wasn't an easy road, but it was the right road.

Markee named his house in London 'Follies' End' because his old life of drink and drugs was over—the folly was finished. He had found a better way. In following Jesus, he had found himself.

Advent is a time for choosing the right path, though it be the harder. It is a time for follies' end! It's a time to recognize that the Son of Man is not only human, meek, gentle and kind. He is also the Son of Man, riding on the clouds in judgment.

Advent is a time to prepare to meet the Son of Man so that, on that last day, we will not be ashamed:

*'What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.'*

LUKE 9:25-26

Advent is a time to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man.

## Prayer

*Son of Man,*

*You are coming*

*to sift us,*

*to try us,*

*to judge us.*

*Help us to face up*

*To who we really are*

*And how we really live.*

*Help us to take the harder path,*

*And reach our 'follies' end'.*



## Jesus: the Unexpected Visitor

1 THESSALONIANS 5:1-6

*Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep.*

Anyone who has ever tried to keep awake during a night watch will know what a struggle it can be. Once, when I was a teenager, I went to help crew a massive old sailing brig across the North Sea. One night I was asked to steer the ship during the worst shift of all—from midnight to four in the morning. There was only a gentle breeze, and the sails on the two massive masts flapped gently as we slowly sailed towards the coast of England.

After about two hours, the gentle rocking of the boat and the dull green glow of the nautical compass lulled me to sleep. I simply nodded off, and my hands slipped away from the large wheel in front of me.

Minutes later the vessel 'jibbed', veering off on to another course, the massive sails swaying across the deck. The boat juddered violently and woke up everyone on board. I was not the most popular member of the crew that night. I had fallen asleep!

Three great Advent parables are all set at night. All of them are solemn warnings lest we fall asleep and take our ease when we should be most alert. They remind us that Advent is the season when we should review our lives, face up to our failures and prepare to meet Jesus face to face—a time to wake up and get ready!

The bridesmaids' role is mainly to support the bride at weddings today, but in Jesus' day their function was to await the bridegroom and to welcome him to the great celebration. In the story that Jesus told, only five of the ten girls were prepared for the long night of waiting. The lamps belonging to the other five girls ran out of oil and they had to go shopping to get fresh supplies. Just when they'd disappeared, the bridegroom arrived. They missed the great moment and failed in their duty. 'And Jesus concluded, "Be on your guard, then, because you do not know the day or the hour"' (Matthew 25:13, GNB).

Householders are very security-minded today. Most of us have locks and bolts, and many have sensors and alarms. Some private homes even have television surveillance and a direct connection to a security company. In the story about burglars that Jesus told (Matthew 24:43-44), the householder simply shut the door and went to bed. He didn't set a guard at the door, or put extra security at his windows, and nor did he sleep in a position where an intruder might disturb him. He didn't anticipate trouble or expect a burglar. He simply went to sleep. But burglars don't make appointments, so the householder missed his coming and failed to protect his property.

***'So then, you also must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.'***

MATTHEW 24:44 (GNB)

Employees are often neglectful of their responsibilities today. Absenteeism, lack of commitment and even sleeping during night shifts have been uncovered in some large organizations. In the story that Jesus told (Luke 12:35-38), some servants were alone at night. They could have skipped off home, fallen asleep, or taken life easy. Instead, deep in the night, they were awake, alert and preparing for their Master's return. He arrived suddenly and unexpectedly and was thrilled to see them working so hard. Instead of them waiting on him, he insisted on serving them—because he was so impressed! They were awake, prepared, ready.

***'And you, too, must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him.'***

LUKE 12:40 (GNB)



Advent is the season to remember that Jesus not only came, but that he's coming again. He came the first time as a baby in a manger, but when he returns at the end of time he will come as our Lord and our Judge.

Of course, it would be very convenient if we knew the date of his return! We could make sure that our lives were in order, that we had confessed our sins and prepared ourselves to meet him. But although his return is definite, the day and the hour are God's hidden secret.

Advent, then, is a time of preparation, a season for getting ready—a time to face up to our failure, confess our sins, and recognize that we've fallen short of what He's expected of us.

The famous Christian leader Bishop Gore used to preach the same message to his ordinands each year. On the night before their ordination he would say, "Tomorrow I will say to you, 'Will you, will you, will you?'" But one day another will ask, "Have you? Have you? Have you?"

If Jesus returned tonight, would you be ill-prepared like those bridesmaids? Would you be shocked and surprised like that householder? Or would he find you prepared, committed and ready, like the servants awaiting their Master's return?

Advent is a season for recognizing that Jesus is not only our Friend and Saviour, he is also an unexpected visitor. It's a season for preparation, for readiness and for fresh commitment. It's a time for renewing our relationship with him and for re-ordering our priorities, so that when he returns we won't be ashamed.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus,*

*Watch me,*

*Search me,*

*Try me,*

*And see if there be any wicked way in me.*

*I want to be ready...*

*Amen*

## **Week Three**

# **JESUS—COME ON EARTH**

In these days before Christmas, we follow the story of his coming in all its mystery and majesty and look at its relevance to our lives.



## Jesus: the Name Above All Names

LUKE 1:30-33

*But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.'*

I well remember the *angst* that my wife and I went through when choosing a name for our first child. We both had our preferences, and when we browsed through a book of names we became more confused than ever. There are so many potential pitfalls, particularly when your surname is Frost.

Mary and Joseph didn't have to face such a struggle when naming their first child, for God had already named him. Unlike any other child who was ever born, Jesus had existed before. He had been alive since before the start of time, and so it was God's privilege to name him rather than Mary's or Joseph's. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son...' (John 3:16).

The angel gave the instruction about Jesus' name to his mother, and Joseph heard about it when he received the perplexing news that he was soon to become a father. The angel said, 'She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins' (Matthew 1:21).

But this was not an unusual name; in fact, it was one of the commonest names in Israel at the time of his birth. That's why they called him 'Jesus of Nazareth' to distinguish him from all of the other Jesuses that there were around at the time!

The name Jesus was popular because it was so significant to the

Jews. Jesus was the Greek form of 'Joshua' or 'Jehoshua', which means 'Jehovah is salvation'. Two famous characters in Jewish history bore this name.

The first was Moses' successor. In Numbers 13:8 his name is given as 'Oshea' or 'Hoshea', but Moses changed it to 'Jehoshua'. Joshua was the dynamic young leader who took on the mantle of Moses and led the people of Israel into the promised land. In a significant way, Jesus was like Joshua, for he leads us into all that God has promised us—and has conquered every enemy, even the last great enemy of death!

The second was Joshua the high priest. He was high priest when the ragged remnant of Jews left captivity in Babylon and went back to their own land to rebuild the temple in 537BC. The prophet Zechariah put a crown on Joshua's head (Zechariah 6:9-15), something which was unique in all the priesthood of Israel. By his life and leadership Joshua had demonstrated that he was both a priest and a king. Jesus, however, is King of a Kingdom that will never end and he exercises a priesthood that is eternal!

The name 'Jesus', then, was rich in meaning for the Jews. It spoke of salvation, hope, leadership, priesthood and royalty. It's ironic, therefore, that Pilate ordered this name to be written above the cross. For Jesus meant the 'one who saves' and the cross was the way that he did it!

Jesus came to do something that no one else could do: he came to save us from our sins. His name described the purpose of his coming: '...that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

Warren W. Wiersbe wrote:

***Great names come and go, but the name of Jesus remains. The devil still hates it, the world still opposes it, but God still blesses it and we can still claim it! The name of Jesus is the key that unlocks the door of prayer and the treasury of God's grace. It's the weapon that defeats the enemy and the motivation that compels our sacrifice and service. It's the name that causes our hearts to rejoice and our lips to sing his praise.***

THE NAMES OF JESUS, BAKER BOOKS, 1997



One day, at the end of time, everyone will understand why this name is so important:

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

PHILIPPIANS 2:9-11

### **Meditation**

*How sweet the name of Jesus sounds  
In a believer's ear!  
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,  
And drives away his fear.  
It makes the wounded spirit whole,  
And calms the troubled breast;  
'Tis manna to the hungry soul,  
And to the weary rest.  
Dear name! the rock on which I build,  
My shield and hiding place,  
My never-failing treasury filled  
With boundless stores of grace!  
Jesus! my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,  
My Prophet, Priest, and King,  
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,  
Accept the praise I bring.*

JOHN NEWTON (1725-1807)

MONDAY OF WEEK THREE

## **Jesus: Son of God**

LUKE 1:34-38

*'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.' 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.' Then the angel left her.*

Right from this announcement of his birth, God made it clear that Jesus would be no ordinary man. The nature of his birth marked him out as very different and indicated that he was to be seen as the Son of God and not the son of Joseph.

While many people today can believe that Jesus was a great prophet, teacher or healer, they cannot accept that he was and is the Son of God. Without appreciating this aspect of his life, however, they haven't begun to comprehend who he really is.

The early Church was so concerned that its members should believe in Jesus' divine Sonship that they made it a basic confession for baptism. Just in case anyone should be confused about the matter, Mark introduced his Gospel with the words, 'The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (Mark 1:1).

In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that Philip the evangelist made it clear to the Ethiopian eunuch that, if he believed with all his heart, he could be baptized. The Ethiopian replied, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God' (Acts 8:37).

The first letter of John, which was a major defence of orthodox faith, was addressed to those who gave their allegiance to the Son of



God. In 1 John 4:15 we read, 'If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God.'

In the opening years of the new millennium, I believe that our recognition of Jesus as the Son of God will be under greater threat than ever. In a multi-cultural and multi-faith society, there will be growing pressure to build bridges with those who cannot accept that he is the Son of God. We should welcome dialogue with other faith communities, but there are some aspects of our Christianity which are non-negotiable. Our belief in Jesus as the Son of God is one such central aspect of our faith. Those of us who are unwilling to let go of this central aspect of our faith may be considered bigoted and narrow, and looked on as people who hinder inter-faith dialogue.

In many parts of the world, committed Christians are already paying an enormous cost as they defend this central doctrine. In 1999, Baroness Caroline Cox went on a fact-finding mission in the Sudan. She encountered there Christian communities who have endured torture, slavery and death rather than deny the central tenets of their Christian faith. In parts of India and in the remoter parts of the Philippines, committed Christians have undergone intense persecution in recent years. They have had their homes burnt to the ground and suffered intolerable violence rather than give up their belief that Jesus is the Son of God.

Some years ago, I met a Chinese Christian leader who had been tortured and imprisoned because he wouldn't deny the 'Sonship' of Jesus Christ. His ongoing witness in the prison camp led the authorities to give him the worst job they could find. Each morning they marched him to the cesspit to wade through the excrement while hauling a rake behind him. The pastor told me that each morning, at the start of this dreadful task, he would sing at the top of his voice, 'He walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own.'

The Sonship of Jesus is part of the non-negotiable core of our faith. It marks out Jesus' relationship with God as different from that of everyone else who ever lived. It is this Sonship that gave him the authority to say what he said and to do what he did and to give us what he gave.

When we call Jesus the Son of God, we remember the intimacy of his relationship with the Father. In John 10:30, Jesus tells us that 'I

and the Father are one'. In the mysterious story of the baptism of Jesus, God's voice declared him 'Son' (Luke 3:22). On the Mount of Transfiguration, God affirmed his Son from the cloud of glory (Mark 9:7). There can be no doubt that Jesus shared a special relationship with God.

It was this Sonship, shared from before the start of time, that gave Jesus such a profound knowledge of God. It was this relationship that enabled him to reveal God's perfect plan for salvation. It was this intimacy that was at the heart of his mission. Jesus once prayed, 'And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began' (John 17:5).

The knowledge that Jesus shared flowed from his relationship with his Father: 'For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them' (John 17:8). That's why we can trust what he said, and that's why it's so important to obey him.

The relationship between the Son and his Father was also a relationship of obedience. Time and again through the Gospel story, we see that Jesus was willing to submit to his Father's will. We recall the dramatic scene in the garden of Gethsemane, when Jesus looked toward the suffering and dereliction of the cross and said, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done' (Luke 22:42).

During Advent, we focus on the coming of the Son of God. This is a central tenet of our faith, and we shouldn't accept it lightly or easily. After all, we may be called upon to die rather than deny it.

### **Prayer**

*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
I remember before you today  
All those who suffer in your service,  
Who share the faith at the risk of their lives,  
Who give, without counting the cost.*

*Strengthen me, I pray,  
That I might be a witness where I am,  
And that, just as you were obedient to your Father,  
I may be obedient to you.*



## Jesus: the Wisdom of God

1 CORINTHIANS 1:20-21, 25

*Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe... For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

I struggle with mystery. I prefer things to be clear-cut, explicable and easy to understand. Yet in my heart I know that many of the most important things in life can never be fully explained.

There's a fascination with mystery today and it's characterized by an American TV series called *The X Files*. *The X Files* is compulsive viewing for millions each week as agents Mulder and Scully face up to the mysterious and unexplained phenomena they encounter in their secret work for the US government. Many of their discoveries have an eerie, spiritual feel about them and compel rational human beings to face the irrational. The force of the drama is focused around intelligent people trying to explain the inexplicable.

There has been a tendency for Christians to downplay the 'mystery' of Christianity in recent years. We are taught to see Jesus as someone approachable and ordinary—someone who is really like us.

Perhaps Advent is a good time to discover the mystery of Jesus again—a time to wonder at some of the strange events surrounding his coming; a time to look at those things that we can't readily understand and sometimes struggle to accept.

Firstly, it was odd that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. His parents

didn't live there, and they had no family home in the town. It was a small Judean hill-community with nothing special except some historic links with David the shepherd-boy king. Jesus wouldn't have been born there at all if it hadn't been for a census ordered by Caesar Augustus which meant that Joseph had to return to the home town of his ancestors.

It was strange that Jesus was born on the very night that Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem—strange because, in so doing, they fulfilled Micah's ancient prophecy. The officials in Herod's palace remembered this prophecy when the Magi asked where the King of the Jews would be born:

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*

MICAH 5:2 (RSV)

Secondly, the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospels is strange. It could certainly be traced back into distant history. Both Matthew and Luke list the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew takes it to Abraham, the first Hebrew, while Luke goes right back to Adam. Both writers trace his ancestry through Joseph to show Jesus' place in the historic continuity of God's dealings with Israel. This, in itself, was impressive.

But then both writers devalue this ancestral link by making it clear that Jesus was born through God's grace and not by normal human reproduction. They explain that Joseph was not the biological father, for Mary was a virgin. They both claim that Jesus was born by direct action of God in the womb of Mary. Because of this, Jesus fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, made about 700 years before his birth:

*The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel ('God is with us').*

ISAIAH 7:14, RSV

Thirdly, it's strange how a bright star arrived in the sky at just the right time. Some cuneiform tablets written in 8BC in Babylonian



foretold a rare Jupiter/Saturn conjunction. Astronomers tell us that in the year 7BC (the most likely historical birthdate of Jesus Christ), this conjunction between the planets Jupiter and Saturn took place in the part of the sky known as 'The Fishes'. It was a phenomenon which only happens every 794 years, and this convergence would have looked like a very bright new star.

The journey of the Magi may have been instigated by the arrival of this strange new star in the sky. When they arrived in Jerusalem they asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him' (Matthew 2:2).

In the ancient world, Jupiter denoted a world ruler and Saturn was the star of Palestine. 'The Fishes' was believed to indicate the arrival of the 'last days'. Strange that Jesus should be born at exactly the time of such an astronomical wonder as this.

And wasn't it strange that, seven hundred years before Christ's birth, Isaiah knew that he would come to establish an eternal throne. He would come, not as a mighty warrior, but as a servant; not by powerful invasion, but in weakness; not by winning battles, but by saving souls.

*He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

ISAIAH 53:3-5

The more I struggle with the mysteries surrounding the coming of Jesus, the stranger the incarnation becomes. It isn't understandable, simple or rational. It's about God working to a more mysterious plan than my simple mind can grasp—a plan to bring us back into relationship with himself, and to fulfil Isaiah's famous prophecy.

*But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:27-29

### Prayer

*This Advent, Lord,*

*Help me to look beyond the fairy-lights.*

*Help me to pause and gasp at the mystery of it all.*

*Perhaps I will never fully understand your coming,*

*But I reach beyond the tinsel decorations*

*To touch the mystery...*

*And wonder at your greatness.*



## Jesus: the Stranger

JOHN 1:10

*He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.*

Several years ago, our local church put on a Christmas play, but it was a Nativity with a difference. Instead of the usual cast of shy children, the play was performed by adults. Joseph and Mary were a young couple in the church with their newborn child, the innkeeper was a burly chap with a beard, the wise men were local teachers and the shepherds a group of blue-collar workers.

I don't think I've ever enjoyed a Nativity play so much. I knew the people involved and they were cast to play the roles most close to who they were. This Nativity made the Christmas story real and relevant, and it made me wonder how I'd have fared if I'd lived in the real Christmas story two thousand years ago.

If I'd been Joseph, trying to live a good and honourable life as a carpenter in Nazareth, and if I'd been very much in love with Mary... how would I have responded to the news that she was pregnant? I might have been so angry and so disappointed that I'd have called the whole relationship off. I might have been so angry that I'd have missed the angel's coming and disregarded the message that he brought. If I'd been Joseph, I might have blown it.

If I'd been the innkeeper, I'd have been capitalizing on an opportunity to make some money. Running a hotel in a backwoods hill-town like Bethlehem would have been a struggle. The census was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make a fortune. I'd have pushed up the room rates and taken on extra staff. Every square inch of my hotel would have been put to good use. At the very busiest moment, when a young couple arrived from Nazareth, I may have been too

preoccupied with my business to let them in. As the innkeeper, I might have blown it.

If I'd been one of those shepherds, out on the cold and exposed hills outside Bethlehem the night that the angels sang, what would I have done? I might have blamed the heavenly vision on too much wine. I might have looked at my sheep and considered it too dangerous to leave them unprotected. I may have stayed to tend the flock, preferring to snuggle up close to the fire and sleep. When the angels announced good news to the world, what would I have done? As a shepherd, I might have blown it.

And if I'd been a wise man, a student of the stars and a devotee of philosophy, would I have left the comfort of my Persian library to trek across Palestine in pursuit of a distant star and a promised Saviour? And, having reached Herod's palace to find that no king had been born, would I have considered the whole project a wild-goose chase? Would I have turned my camel round and headed for home? Would I have been too bound up with my intellectual preconceptions to hear the message of the coming King? As a wise man, I might have blown it.

Happily, the characters in the real story didn't blow it. They did get to meet the Stranger, the Promised One, the newborn King. Yet there were others, many others, who missed the boat. John tells us that 'though God made the world through him, yet the world did not recognize him. He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him' (John 1:10-11, GNB). I wonder how many others were warned of the coming Saviour but chose to carry on as usual. They were too preoccupied with the routine of their lives to recognize that this newborn baby was, in fact, the Son of God. They really blew it.

Leo Tolstoy's famous story about an old shoe-mender echoes this mysterious aspect of the Christmas story. An old cobbler wanted desperately to meet the Lord, but when God came to visit him in his cluttered shop, he didn't recognize him. Each time God came, he came incarnate in human need—in someone needing warmth, or food, or comfort. Only at the very end of the story does the cobbler realize that, in caring for the strangers at his door, he was in fact caring for his Saviour.



The Son of God entered the world in the disguise of a newborn baby in a cattle-shed. Many didn't recognize him when he came. He comes today disguised in human need—and many of us fail to recognize still. When I pass the homeless beggar in the doorway or turn a deaf ear to some cry for help, have I really blown it? Have I missed the opportunity to meet the Stranger who comes in humble disguise, seeking my help?

*'Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."'*

MATTHEW 25:34-36

### Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
You come in the hungry,  
You come in the thirsty,  
You come as a stranger,  
You come naked, or sick, or as a prisoner.  
Help me to recognize you...  
And to welcome you in.  
Amen

## Jesus: Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

ISAIAH 9:6-7

For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
Of the increase of his government and peace  
there will be no end.

This great Old Testament passage gives us a sense of the greatness of Jesus Christ. The names used here in Isaiah help us to understand him, and to worship and praise him in the right way. Let's look at them one by one.

### Wonderful

We live in a society which is largely devoid of wonder. Many are bored at work, bored at home and bored with life itself. Anyone who discovers Jesus, however, discovers a new sense of amazement and 'wonder'. From the announcement of his birth, there was a sense of wonder about him: 'All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them' (Luke 2:18).

Wherever Jesus went, he made a great impact. He fed the five thousand, he showed the disciples where to catch a shoal of fish, he turned water into wine. Ordinary events took on extraordinary



characteristics. His influence on people was the same. Ordinary lives were transformed, broken people were made whole, sick people were made well and the dead were raised to life. His influence was wonderful!

Most of all, however, his teaching creates in us a sense of awe and wonder. He promised that he could give us life; and countless millions down the centuries have testified to finding it.

One of the greatest privileges in my ministry has been to see men and women finding faith in Jesus. When they discover that Jesus is so loving, so caring and so faithful, they can only describe him as 'wonderful'.

Advent is a time to marvel at our Saviour, Jesus Christ, and to call him 'Wonderful!'

### **Counsellor**

When we look at the way that Jesus related to people and cared for them, we see someone who always had time. He was patient with his disciples, answering their questions and guiding them in their lives.

We, too, can know him as 'Counsellor'. We can trust him completely because we know that he loves us, for he laid down his life for us. We can trust him because he loves us just as he loved his disciples of old. Like a good counsellor, he doesn't protect us from life's ups and downs but helps us to face them honestly and courageously. More than any human counsellor, he understands us and knows all about us. He sees behind the masks we wear. He doesn't send us out to face the world alone; he walks with us through all the troubles of our lives.

Best of all, he continues to pray for us. What a great Counsellor Jesus is!

### **Mighty God**

Jesus revealed his greatness in the majestic work of creation. In John 1:3 we read that 'through him all things were made', and in Hebrews 1:3 we learn that he 'upholds all things by the word of his power' (KJV). It's a strange paradox that a baby in a manger was really 'Mighty God'.

Jesus revealed himself as 'Mighty God' by the miracles he

performed on earth. His enemies argued that his power came from Satan, but he rebutted this accusation with the phrase 'If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself' (Matthew 12:26).

He revealed himself as 'Mighty God' in the miracle of his resurrection. On Easter Day, he opened up the way for our salvation. When we ask him to come into our lives, the power of 'Mighty God' infuses us and changes us. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves.

If we are to know Jesus for ourselves, and to experience his transforming power in our lives, we must discover him as 'Mighty God'—the one who has limitless power, limitless resources and limitless love—our 'Mighty God'!

### **The Everlasting Father**

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, eternity invaded time. His words were the words of 'eternal life'. His whole perspective was different because he saw life from the viewpoint of the throne of the 'Everlasting Father'.

By his coming, his living and his dying, he opened up the way to eternity. Through him we can discover an eternal purpose in our everyday lives. When Jesus is in control of our lives, each moment has eternal significance. He gives us a quality of life that comes straight out of eternity!

### **The Prince of Peace**

One of the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry was his peace. He brought it to a howling storm on Galilee, to a demonic man called Mob, to the weeping neighbours of Jairus, and to a sword-wielding disciple called Peter.

Most remarkable of all, however, is that Jesus brings us peace with God. He reconciled everything to himself, including everything on earth and in heaven (Colossians 1:20). Whatever race or culture we're from, there can be no division between us, because in Jesus Christ we are all made one. Through him we find access to our heavenly Father.

When I was a student at university, my tutor was the famous Bible scholar, the late Dr F.F. Bruce. One of his favourite phrases was this: 'Peace is joy resting, and joy is peace dancing!'



Our everyday life as Christians should be enriched by that kind of peace—a peace that only Jesus can give us, a 'peace that passes all understanding'. So, peace be with you this Advent.

### Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ,*

*I welcome you this Christmas time.*

*You are Wonderful*

*Counsellor*

*Mighty God*

*Everlasting Father*

*Prince of Peace*

*And I worship you.*

### FRIDAY OF WEEK THREE

## Jesus: the King

MATTHEW 2:10-12

*When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

No wonder Herod was worried! The Magi arrived at the door of his palace asking, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?' (Matthew 2:2). In such unstable times, with his Roman overlords on one side and the Jewish Zealots plotting revolution on the other, the last thing he needed was another contender for his throne!

He needn't have worried. Jesus had indeed come on earth as a king, but not the kind of king that Herod feared. For Christ was no ordinary king, and his was no ordinary kingdom! A humble girl called Mary already knew what kind of king her son would become:

*'You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end.'*

LUKE 1:31-33

Herod was a petty, neurotic little ruler, and a mere pawn in the international strategic plans of Rome. He was powerless, but Jesus the coming King would be the most powerful king in the world!



Herod was a man intent on preserving his own power base, and on playing by whatever rules he could to keep the opposition down. He was selfish, but Jesus the coming King would be the most sacrificial king in the world.

Herod was a man so wicked that he would rather murder hundreds of innocent children than allow any newborn baby to threaten his status. He was evil, but Jesus the coming King would be the most righteous king in all the world.

The Magi understood that they had come to find a special kind of king. Their gifts symbolized the reign of someone very special.

They brought gold, a gift that symbolized kingship. It was highly prized as far back as Abraham's time and coined since the time of Ezra. The Jews were mainly dependent on supplies of gold from Arabia, so it's little wonder that the Magi brought gold from their homeland. Gold for Jesus, the powerful king.

They brought frankincense, a resinous gum which was bitter to taste. It was culled from trees of the terebinth family. It burns with a steady flame for a long time, and derives its name from the pleasant fragrance that it disseminates. It was found in Arabia, and the Jews had used it for centuries as an ingredient of incense in their sacrificial offerings (Exodus 30:34). It was a symbol of deity. Frankincense for Jesus, the sacrificial king.

Their third gift was myrrh, an aromatic resin. It was used with other spices for the anointing of holy things such as the tent of meeting, the ark, the table, the lampstand and the altar (Exodus 30:26). It was also used for embalming the dead, including the body of Jesus (John 19:39). Myrrh for Jesus, the holy king.

Such gifts would have been inappropriate for a king like Herod, but they were just right for King Jesus. His Kingdom wasn't based on the power politics of petty regimes, it was based on the eternal and lasting values of the Kingdom of God!

This newborn King would rule over a Kingdom that would transcend political barriers, continental boundaries and the cultural eras. The writer to the Hebrews described it as a 'kingdom that cannot be shaken' (Hebrews 12:28): unmovable; everlasting; permanent; abiding; indestructible.

Several years ago, I visited Tunisia with a Christian tour group. One unforgettable day, we visited a massive stadium on the perimeter of the Sahara desert. As I entered the arena I gazed up at the towering tiers of seating that almost blotted out the sun. It seated 30,000; but it wasn't a football stadium. It was built by the Romans to house the spectators viewing their violent games. The tour guide explained that on the spot where we stood, the early Christians had been martyred by gladiators and wild animals.

I clambered up the steep, worn steps and sat in the highest part of the grandstand. I looked down on the arena and pictured the scenes of torture and bloodshed from so long ago. I reflected on the transient empires of humanity that are so painfully built, yet so quickly turned to dust. The generals and governors who filled the places of honour in that ancient stadium are gone for ever, their power eradicated, their policies forgotten, their empire discredited.

Yet King Jesus, for whom those early disciples gave their lives, still lives. His power is undiminished. His teaching is still shaping the world. His Kingdom grows and grows, stronger than ever.

An old missionary told me how he was once in charge of a large church compound in China. There was a church, a school, an orphanage, a hospital, and a thriving Christian community. One day, quite unexpectedly, the Red Guard marched in and arrested the missionaries. The guards torched the compound and, as they were marched away, he turned to see the village being burnt to the ground.

Many years later, as an old man, the missionary was taken by his sons back to the place where he'd begun his ministry in rural China. He didn't even recognize the place, and no one recognized him. On the Sunday morning he attended a vast church and sat, astonished, as thousands of people came to worship Christ in service after service. He returned to England renewed in faith and vision as never before. 'Now I know what resurrection means!' he said.

The Kingdom of God is not a manmade kingdom, and it's not ruled by a human king. King Jesus will rule over it for ever and ever, and on into eternity. His reign is everlasting.

This Christmas, welcome Jesus—the newborn King!



## Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
I welcome you as King.  
Your power is limitless.  
Your glory is matchless.  
Your goodness is boundless.  
You are the King of all kings,  
the Lord of all lords,  
the Prince of peace.  
Remind me that yours is the kingdom,  
the power,  
and the glory,  
For ever, and ever.  
Amen

SATURDAY OF WEEK THREE

## Jesus: a Baby

LUKE 2:26-32 (THE MESSAGE)

*In Jerusalem at the time, there was a man, Simeon by name, a good man, a man who lived in the prayerful expectancy of help for Israel. And the Holy Spirit was on him. The Holy Spirit had shown him that he would see the Messiah of God before he died. Led by the Spirit, he entered the Temple. As the parents of the child Jesus brought him in to carry out the rituals of the Law, Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God:*

*'God, you can now release your servant;  
release me in peace as you promised.  
With my own eyes I've seen your salvation;  
it's now out in the open for everyone to see:  
A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations,  
and of glory for your people Israel.'*

*Jesus' father and mother were speechless with surprise at these words. Simeon went on to bless them, and said to Mary his mother,*

*'This child marks both the failure and  
the recovery of many in Israel,  
A figure misunderstood and contradicted—  
the pain of a sword-thrust through you—  
But the rejection will force honesty,  
as God reveals who they really are.'*

Experts tell us that one of the most stressful experiences we can have as human beings is when we become parents. The arrival of a newborn baby has a profound effect on every aspect of our lives.



New parents, who used to be able to order their time, discover that time revolves around the baby's feeding, sleeping and waking! Once they used to be able to save their money, but now find themselves financially committed for many years to come.

A baby changes the whole pattern of relationships in a marriage, and new parents have to discover unknown reservoirs of love to enfold this new member of the family. Their plans for the future are thrown into disarray, and they find themselves having to re-order their priorities!

A tiny, vulnerable, helpless, newborn baby brings out of us deep feelings and protective instincts. It changes our lives. This new life, with all its new potential, encapsulates all of our highest hopes and dreams for the future of humanity.

According to an ancient custom in Jerusalem, it was usual for parents to take their child to the temple for an aged rabbi to bless it and pray for it. It may have been on such an occasion that Mary and Joseph placed Jesus in the arms of the righteous and devout man called Simeon. The old man was deeply moved and, rather like a slave addressing his master, Simeon asked God to dismiss him from duty. With his own eyes he had seen God's 'salvation', and he'd seen it in the newborn baby of a peasant woman.

Next, the new parents met Anna the prophetess. Her long widowhood was a mark of honour, and as a prophetess she was accorded a rare honour in Jewish history. She, too, saw in the newborn child God's plan for redemption and went about telling everyone what she had seen.

In this Advent season, it is good to remember that God did not send to earth a mighty warrior, a wealthy merchant or a mystical wizard. God entered human history in the form of a newborn baby.

As each of us draws near to Jesus, like Simeon or Anna in the Bible story, we see a God who is willing to become humble and weak in order to demonstrate his great love for us. We see a God who takes on frail human flesh and, in so doing, cuts through our hardness, prejudice and pride to come to us as a helpless baby—the most profound symbol of human vulnerability.

When I became a father and cradled my newborn son in my arms, I didn't think about the parenting classes I'd attended, or the books

on becoming a father that I'd scanned. There was only one question: did I love and accept this child? And there was only one possible response: you bet I did!

As we approach the manger this Christmas and gaze in wonder at the newborn Jesus, we see there the kind of God we worship. He is a God who speaks to us of frailty and meekness, of tenderness and compassion; a God who reaches out to us in love, and who calls us to respond to him.

Some of us find it easier to respond to Jesus with an academic, cerebral kind of faith that says, 'I can accept your coming intellectually, and I can respond to you with my mind.' But when you cradle a newborn baby in your arms, you unlock a kind of heart-love that defies reason and surpasses logic.

This Advent, come to Jesus with the kind of openness of those two old folk, Simeon and Anna. Enter into their experience of hope and joy. And tell him that you love him with a kind of love that says, 'I accept you, and you can have my heart.'

### **Nunc Dimittis (The Song of Simeon)**

*Lord now you let your servant go in peace:*

*your word has been fulfilled.*

*My own eyes have seen the salvation:*

*which you have prepared in the sight of every people;*

*a light to reveal you to the nations:*

*and the glory of your people Israel.*

*Glory to the Father and to the Son:*

*and to the Holy Spirit;*

*as it was in the beginning is now:*

*and shall be for ever. Amen*

THE ALTERNATIVE SERVICE BOOK 1980



**Week Four**

## **JESUS—IN OUR LIVES**

Jesus was not only an historical character—he is a real person and he invites us to share a real relationship with him. Knowing him in all his fullness is what makes this relationship so rich.



## Jesus: the Bread of Life

JOHN 6:49-51

*Jesus said, 'Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.'*

In the Old Testament, the people of Israel cried out to God for food during their long, lost years in the wilderness, and he answered by providing 'manna' for them at just the right time and in just the right quantity to sustain them on their journey (see Exodus 16:14-31). This 'manna' was an assurance of God's understanding of their physical need and of his compassionate provision for them just where they were.

Jesus himself used this miracle as an illustration that he, himself, was God's provision for our spiritual hunger. He had come down from heaven to satisfy that inner hunger for 'something to live for' which mere food can never meet.

*Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.' 'Sir,' they said, 'from now on give us this bread.'*

JOHN 6:32-34

Jesus told them this because some of them had misunderstood the feeding of the five thousand. The people who had seen it first-hand were deeply moved by it. Here was a Messiah who not only told good

stories, but who could feed his audience, too! The next day they tracked him down, and were eager for a repeat performance.

Perhaps, they thought, Jesus was a new political leader whose miracles could give them greater prosperity and a higher standard of living! Jesus had to stamp out such rumours quickly, and teach them that although his ministry was about bread, it wasn't anything to do with fresh loaves! The hunger he had come to satisfy was to be found even among the most well-fed people in the world.

There are millions of people around the world today who are hungry for this spiritual 'bread'. They may be overweight physically, but spiritually they are starving!

A few months ago, the account of an inquest in South Wales caught my eye. It recounted the death of 27-year-old Andrew Thomas. He'd been made redundant through the demise of the coal industry and was unable to find work. He filled out many applications and went for lots of different jobs, but was unsuccessful. He became so despondent about his life that eventually he spent most of his waking hours in front of the television and lost the will to go out.

No medical reason could be given for his death, and his father simply told the court that Andrew had 'nothing to live for'. It seemed to be a tragic indictment of our hi-tech, success-orientated, hectic society.

But there are others, many others, who face the same feelings of worthlessness, desolation and futility. The psychologist C.G. Jung wrote, 'Among all my patients in the second half of life, that is, over thirty-five, there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life' (*Psychology and Religion*, Yale University Press, 1938).

Christmas, perhaps more than any other time, is a season when many of us ask searching questions about our lives, our relationships and our existence. The emptiness that we can mask during the regular routine of work and leisure can be laid bare in the peculiar stresses of the Christmas season.

If 'emptiness' and 'pointlessness' are words which describe how you're feeling this year, may I urge you to go to Communion on Christmas Eve? That midnight Communion has to be one of the most popular and mystical celebrations of the Eucharist during the whole year. The church is aglow with candles, it's usually packed to



the doors, and there's a sense of eager anticipation of all that the coming day will bring.

The Christmas Communion is rich in symbolism, too, but for me, one of the most significant symbols is the bread itself. When the priest holds the bread high, I like to remember that Jesus has come to be the Bread of Life. It's a symbol that speaks poignantly to all of our feelings of emptiness, pointlessness and futility.

*Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.*

1 CORINTHIANS 10:16-17

The Christmas Eve Communion is a solemn reminder of why Jesus came down from heaven. He came to satisfy our spiritual need, to provide us with heavenly food, to give us inner strength for life's journey.

If Christmas Day is a time for food, for feasting, and for seasonal fare, perhaps the days before should be a time for fasting—for recognizing that Jesus came down from heaven to feed us spiritually. In knowing Jesus, in loving him and in feeding on him, we meet those inner needs which roast turkey and plum pudding can never satisfy.

Advent, then, is a time for feeding on Christ. He is the One who gave us life, and who, day by day, can give us the spiritual nourishment we need to live it!

### Prayer

*Break thou the bread of life,  
O Lord, to me,  
As thou didst break the loaves  
Beside the sea.  
Beyond the sacred page  
I seek Thee, Lord.  
My spirit longs for thee,  
O Living Word!*

MARY ARTEMISIA LATHBURY (1841-1913)

## Jesus: Our Brother

HEBREWS 2:10-12

*In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering. Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, 'I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.'*

Every Christmas we bring down a small Nativity set which is stored in the attic, and set it out on top of the television set. The pine wood figures, made in Bethlehem, depict the holy family surrounded by the shepherds and wise men.

Whenever I dust off the small figures and set them against the backdrop of the stable, I marvel that Jesus was born into a human family. He was born into a caring, stable network of human relationships.

Yet there are many who find the emphasis on the holy family at Christmas very painful. Those who are bereaved, single, divorced or childless sometimes feel excluded by all this talk of 'family'. It's important to remember, then, that Jesus came to adopt us into his family.

Christians recognize that at the cornerstone of the universe is a relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's a relationship of perfect love, perfect unity and separate identity. Relationship is at the very heart of Christianity. It's a relationship that existed before the planet, and that will outlast history. It's the true model for all human relationships. Christians cannot deny the importance of rich relationships without denying the character of God himself.



We get an insight into the quality of the relationship that Jesus shares with his heavenly Father in the great prayer of John 17. It's a prayer full of affirmation. It's about trust—for Jesus recognized that his authority flowed from the Father—but that trust involved complete obedience.

Most beautiful of all, the prayer demonstrates that Father and Son share a relationship of intimacy. There are no masks and there's no pretending, for they know each other and love each other completely.

Little wonder, then, that it's not a short-lived or transient relationship, but eternal. It's a relationship of intimate sharing and complete understanding and it lasts for ever.

Sometimes shafts of light break through the Bible text to show us how we should live our lives. In studying the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we discover the model for the very basis of human relationships.

We were not created to live lonely, isolated lives, but to belong to each other in beautiful, lasting relationships. This is what makes each day special. These relationships are built on an understanding of our precious value to God and of our value to each other. In this age of transient relationships, broken marriages and disparate families, we, as followers of the God who *is* relationship, are called to show a different way—a way which makes us more human, and which reflects the God in whose image we were created.

For the Christian, the greatest relationship of all is with God himself. The Bible teaches that he will never forget us, like a woman breast-feeding a newborn child. He's always aware of us, as if our name was written on the palms of his hands. He knows everything about us, even the number of hairs on our head. And as he's aware every time a sparrow touches the ground, he's in touch with our every thought and action.

God loves us with an aching heart, like a jilted lover, waiting for his loved one to come back to him. He loves us with forgiving compassion, like a rejected father, waiting for his prodigal to return. He loves us with a spontaneous generosity, like a good man paying off his friend's debts without hope of repayment. He cares for us like a generous stranger, giving the bond-price to let the slave go free.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus modelled the Father's care for each

of us. He trusted his disciples. He was concerned about them. He prayed for their safety. He interceded for their unity. He claimed their protection. But, most of all, he identified with them, for neither he nor they belong to the world. His love was encompassed in one supreme act of generosity on a cross and in his words, 'Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13).

The relationship that Jesus wants with us is not transient or temporary. It's a friendship which can transform our lives and make us more sensitive and human. It's a kind of belonging which will outlast everything else. Jesus wants to be our Brother.

The apostle Paul, who came into Christianity as a stranger from outside, pictured the experience as like being adopted into a wonderful new family. 'So then, you are no longer a slave but a son or daughter... God will give you all that he has for his heirs' (Galatians 4:7).

One day, my friends came to stay with us. It was a hasty and unexpected visit because they had just heard that they were to adopt a newborn baby, and we lived near the children's home. They were very excited, and in one short morning bought up the entire contents of the local Mothercare! It was a tremendous joy to see them with their new baby, and the wonderful way in which they took him into their family.

That was nearly twenty years ago, and recently Bob and his son Andrew, and I and my son Andrew, went for a walk together. It seemed remarkable that we, two fathers with our two sons, had so much in common. There was no difference between Bob and his son and me and mine. Adoption is a mysterious but powerful relationship.

God adopts us into his family, and offers us all the privileges of belonging. This is the remarkable love of God, and it lasts for ever. It's the space where those who feel unwanted and unneeded can discover belonging, involvement, and a life of service beyond themselves.

When Jesus came on earth, he came to open the way for us to be adopted into God's family and to discover the joy and richness of the greatest relationship of all—our friendship with him.



This Advent, discover again the joy of knowing Jesus as a Brother, and thank him again for that precious family of brothers and sisters who are the family of God.

### Prayer

*In the tension of these moments,  
Will you come to me, my Lord?  
Share your presence, share your goodness,  
God on whom I do depend?  
Come, my Saviour, walk beside me  
Through the schedule of my day,  
Meet me in my many meetings,  
Guide me when I pause to pray.  
Lord, I know that you are with me  
In this quickly passing day.  
Help me not to miss your coming;  
Do not let me turn away.  
Lord, I met you in the good times,  
When my way ahead seemed sure.  
Now please come and walk beside me,  
And stay close for ever more.*

## Jesus: the Judge

### MATTHEW 3:7-10

*But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our Father." I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'*

From the outset, John the Baptist made it clear that he was preparing the way for the one who was coming to bring judgment on the people. John called everyone to repentance, and he used baptism as a powerful symbol of cleansing and of a new start.

John outrightly condemned those who queued up on the riverbank to be baptized but whose lives did not measure up to the high standard of God's calling. He compared the religious hypocrites of his day to a 'brood of vipers', and was sarcastic about their claims to God's special favour just because they were the descendants of Abraham. (God can make more children of Abraham out of a pile of stones!)

John's ministry was a preparation for the arrival of Jesus. And he believed that the best way of preparing the people for the coming Messiah was by calling them to repentance and personal preparation.

Advent should be a time of new beginnings for each of us, and an opportunity to prepare ourselves for the arrival of the one who will one day judge us. No matter how uncomfortable we may find it, there is no escaping the fact that the teaching of Jesus is littered with powerful images of judgment. His whole ministry was a warning to us that one day we must face him as our judge.



In the parable of the wheat and the tares, we are told that both are to be allowed to grow together until the harvest. When harvest-time comes, the owner will tell the harvest workers to collect the weeds first and tie them in bundles, ready to be burned (Matthew 13:24-30).

In the parable of the servant who owed the king ten thousand talents, we learn that the king is merciful and forgives him the debt. But later, the same servant refuses to forgive someone who owes him a measly hundred denarii. As a result, the king recalls him, and hands him over to the jailers to be held until he should repay his huge loan in full (Matthew 18:21-35).

In the parable of the sheep and goats, the peoples of the world are divided into two groups. Those who have ministered to the stranger in his hunger, thirst, loneliness, deprivation, sickness and imprisonment are led to one side, and those who refused to offer help and service are led to the other. Those who have failed in their duty 'will go away to eternal punishment' (Matthew 25:31-46).

Those of us who have only ever thought of Jesus as our Friend, Saviour, Comforter and Guide would do well this Advent to recognize that he is also our Judge. Jesus himself defined this important aspect of his ministry in these words:

*'Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.'*

JOHN 5:22-23

Jesus made it clear, then, that our relationship with him is to be cultivated in the knowledge that he is our judge. Some of us who have become too familiar in our relationship with Jesus would do well to develop greater respect for him.

Many of us compartmentalize our lives to such an extent that 'judgment' is seen as something in the future—distant; unreal; only relevant in a future place and time. Advent is a season for recognizing that judgment is not only in the future. It's ongoing, constant, *now*. If our lives are not completely at one with his life, we will soon

discover the withering fire of his judgment. It affects our lives, our spirituality and our ministry *now*, not just in the distant vista of eternity.

Jesus said:

*'I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.'*

JOHN 15:5-8

Jesus is our Judge—today, and tomorrow; now, and in eternity. Advent, then, should be the season for confession, for repentance, and for saying sorry.

In these special days after Christmas, let's hear John the Baptist's ringing words of exhortation: 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord!'

### Prayer

*Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious Majesty to judge both the quick and dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, now and for ever. Amen*

COLLECT FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT (BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER)



## Jesus: the Hero

HEBREWS 12:1-3

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

It's easy to 'grow weary and lose heart'. Our weariness may be triggered by problems at work or in the family, or by the constant stream of depressing news pouring out of the media day by day. It's a weariness that can be caused by ill-health or overwork, or a sense of disillusionment with the world and its people. Such weariness can lead us to 'lose heart', and Christmas is the December tonic designed to combat such midwinter blues!

We all need heroes. In practically every field, there are people who inspire us and keep us going. Thousands of kids look to their heroes in football, cricket or swimming to keep them focused and disciplined in their preparation for the 'big game'. Politicians have heroes, musicians have heroes—we all need heroes to keep us inspired. During the Advent season we should refocus on Jesus—our hero.

The Christmas story is an antidote to weariness. It's a sober reminder that Jesus was a real human being and that in his life he overcame real suffering in the real world. Some Christians speak of him in such hushed tones that they devalue the raw humanity of his life. If we deny that, we deny its power to inspire us when we feel weary.

It's good to remember again that he was born as a real baby. He was a member of a refugee family that fled into Egypt. He worked in a carpenter's shop. He laughed. He cried. He was tempted. He bled. He died. As the writer of Hebrews declared, he 'endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men...' (Hebrews 12:2-3). Yet, when everything and everyone was against him, he kept going. He was faithful to his call. His life fulfilled the slogan, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going'!

His life can really inspire us when we accept his humanity as well as his divinity. His effect on the world can only be understood if we accept that he stepped into human history to live life in the raw. The fact that Jesus was a historical character is well attested. The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius wrote, 'And there arose about this time a man called Jesus—a wise man, if indeed he should be called a man' (*Jewish Antiquities*). Even the Romans recorded that Jesus was a man crucified in Palestine.

The Bible itself gives testimony to him, and some scholars argue convincingly that the accounts of his life were written down much earlier than was originally thought. The apostle Peter declared, 'We have not depended on made-up stories in making known to you the mighty coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. With our own eyes we saw his greatness. We were there when he was given honour and glory by God the Father' (2 Peter 1:16-17).

The British historian Sir James Fraser once wrote, 'The doubts which have been cast on the historical reality of Jesus are, in my judgment, unworthy of serious attention.'

At Christmas time, it's good to focus on the whole story of Jesus. It's good to recognize that he was a real person in real-life situations and that he didn't allow anything to distract him from his mission.

Jesus didn't only talk about the power of God—he stilled the storm. He didn't only talk of forgiveness—he mixed with prostitutes and traitors and showed them how to make a new start. He didn't only talk about prayer—he made lepers whole. Nor did he just preach about service—he washed his disciples' feet. He not only declared God's saving grace—he hung on a cross to prove it. He got the job done!



No wonder, therefore, that William Lecky could write, 'These three short years of active life have done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and the exhortations of moralists.'

Christmas is a time to be grateful to God that he sent his Son into the real world. His life is what keeps us from growing weary, and his sacrifice is what keeps us from losing heart. In the dark days of winter, it's easy to complain and moan. It's at times like this that we must 'look to Jesus' and focus on his trials and temptations. As we empathize with what he went through, we will regain a true perspective of our own sufferings.

So stop complaining! Stop grumbling! Stop moaning! Take a good long look at Jesus, our hero—his life, his love, his deeds. And turn to face the new day in the knowledge that he is with us and that he understands. Let's meet every situation and every new challenge with the simple question, 'What would Jesus do?'

### Prayer

Lord Jesus,  
Forgive me that I grow weary.  
Forgive me that I lose heart.  
Help me turn my eyes to you  
And gain fresh strength  
To run the race before me.

## Jesus: the Priest

HEBREWS 4:14-16

*Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

JOHN 17:20-21

*'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.'*

Christmas can be a particularly busy time of year, and it can sometimes seem even more difficult than usual to carve out some time to be alone with God in prayer. Yet part of the discipline of Advent is to focus our hearts and minds in prayer, and to pray for others. By looking at the way that Jesus prayed, and by understanding something of his priestly role, we can gather strength for this important ministry.

Jesus was completely immersed in human suffering, and this was his driving force in the life of prayer. His coming demonstrated how sharply the values of his Kingdom differed from the values of the world. At his birth he emptied himself and humbled himself. He left the riches of heaven for a meagre stable and a homeless family. He became flesh and, in so doing, became frail and vulnerable.

During his life, he was the 'friend of sinners' and shrank from no one. He cared for crooks like Zacchaeus, those of dubious morality



like the woman of Samaria, and outcasts like the ten lepers. He became powerless, tasted persecution, and went through torture and humiliation. He became incarnate in human need. He was the Servant-King.

One evening at sunset, I stood on the Mount of Olives and looked down over Jerusalem. I remembered the time when Jesus looked over that same city and wept: 'Jerusalem! Jerusalem! You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent you! How many times have I wanted to put my arms round all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!' (Matthew 23:37).

Jesus had an aching burden for the people of that great city. He knew their needs and wanted to embrace them with his love. These were no empty sentiments but the expression of one who lived entirely for others. Jesus loved the world with a depth of compassion that we can't begin to understand.

Jesus modelled that the activity of prayer is not about just mouthing meaningless words. It's a cry from the heart to a loving Father who moves in mighty and mysterious ways. We need to follow Jesus in our own praying for the world. Only when we 'weep with those who weep' do we really begin to understand what intercession is.

But Jesus' life of prayer didn't end with his ministry on earth—it will continue for ever. One of the most mysterious and beautiful things about Jesus is his role as a priest. He is someone who intercedes for us day and night. The kind of praying he began on earth continues into eternity. The writer to the Hebrews explained:

*But because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.'*

HEBREWS 7:24-25

The Rev Dr Brian Dodd, an American minister, has taught me a great deal about prayer. Sometimes he has phoned me long distance from the USA to spend a moment praying for me! It's wonderful to know that people do pray for me, even across thousands of miles. In his book *Praying Jesus' Way* (InterVarsity Press), Brian explains the priestly praying of Jesus in a crisp and powerful way.

*The most encouraging news to be found in the Bible about prayer is that Jesus has made it his continuing purpose to pray for me and for you. Knowing my own faltering faithfulness, I am greatly encouraged to know that when I do not pray or do not know how to pray, Jesus stands in the gap making petitions to God on my behalf. He is faithful when we falter, and he always knows how to pray as he should. Prayer is about an intimate relationship with God that continues on into eternity. Jesus 'lives' for that relationship with God and keeps you and me in mind as he communes with the Father.*

Christmas is a time for prayer, and a special time for intercession for others. It's good to know that sometimes Jesus made a special effort to get alone to pray and that he balanced private and shared praying. He prayed before making important decisions, and he prayed for his disciples. Best of all, though, he still prays for us now. And when we pray, we join a prayer meeting that Jesus is already leading on our behalf!

### Prayer

*Strong Son of God,  
who was tried and tested to the uttermost,  
yet without sin;  
be near me now with Thy strength  
and give me victory over the evil desires  
that threaten to ruin me.*

*I am weak, O Lord, and full of doubts and fears.  
There are moments when I am afraid of myself,  
when the world and the flesh and the devil  
seem more powerful than the forces of good.*

*But now I look to Thee  
in whom dwelleth  
all the fullness of grace  
and might  
and redemption.*



*Blessed Saviour!  
I take Thee afresh to be my Refuge,  
my Cover,  
my Defence,  
my strong Tower  
from the enemy.  
Hear me and bless me  
now and ever  
Amen*  
SAMUEL M'COMB

## Jesus: the Friend

JOHN 15:13-16 (CEV)

*'The greatest way to show love for friends is to die for them. And you are my friends, if you obey me. Servants don't know what their master is doing, and so I don't speak to you as my servants. I speak to you as my friends, and I have told you everything that my Father has told me. You did not choose me. I chose you.'*

Who have you sent Christmas cards to? Customers? Clients? Family? Or just to friends? For many of us, it's an annual stress to know who to remember at Christmas and who we should delete from the list. Sometimes Christmas card lists can seem like an annual stocktake of friendship!

One of the most popular TV shows in the world today is called *Friends*. It's shown in scores of countries around the world. I once saw it in Africa, though I'm pretty sure that some of the fine nuances of the relationships portrayed lost something in Swahili!

The series follows the highs and lows of a group of unmarrieds in their twenties who lurch from disaster to disaster, but who reach out in support of their friends in each episode. It strikes a chord with most of us who would like to have friends who really care.

We're all hungry for relationships which have a richness and a sense of reality. We'd all like friends who will be there when everything goes wrong, soulmates who will cry with us, companions who will love us. These are the kind of people who we'd put at the very top of our Christmas list!

During the Christmas season, it's good to remember that Jesus came into the world to be our friend. He came to call us into a personal relationship with himself. In an age of mass media and mass production, and in a society where most of us live in sprawling



urban conurbations, Jesus welcomes us as personal friends. Jesus doesn't call us to be his friends *en masse*; he invites us one by one. He welcomes us into a relationship with him because we're each unique and special. It's a friendship which enables us to know him and to be known by him, one on one.

In a world in which we're all known as numbers, it's refreshingly different to know that he knows us by name, that he knew us before we were born, and that he knows us better than we know ourselves. The wonder of Christmas is the wonder that He's interested in small and insignificant me!

Jesus is someone who shares the secrets of God's heart with us, who walks alongside us every step of the way. He guides, he supports, he comforts, and he teaches. And the quality of his friendship is defined by his sacrificial love on the cross.

I've had lots of friends during my life and many of them have been very good to me. I doubt if any of them would have actually died for me. But my friend Jesus did. Jesus died that I might know the quality and depth of his love. He died to reach down to me and lift me into the Father's presence. This is the quality of his friendship, the extent of his caring, the magnitude of his compassion.

If we are truly to be the friends of Jesus, we must give time to cultivating this relationship. We must create opportunities to seek his presence and to listen as well as speak.

There are many levels of relationship, from the vague acquaintanceships that fill our working days to the deep friendships that change the direction of our lives. True friendship gives opportunity to be quiet as well as to talk and gives space for the silence of togetherness as well as for the communication of words.

Deep relationships take us to levels of caring which transcend the chatter of everyday conversation. One of the characteristics of this kind of friendship is that we want to spend quality time with someone. And we want that time to be uncluttered and expansive.

There are some days when the friendship of Jesus is very real to me—days when he shares my burdens and carries my load. There are other days when I don't feel him close, but even then I know that he's promised that he'll never leave me nor forsake me. And that's the measure of the best friendship of all!

In these hectic days of Christmas will you give Jesus the most precious gift of all... some of your time?

### Prayer

*Lord, you are my friend...*

*When I'm on my own,*

*When I'm in a crowd,*

*When I'm up or down,*

*In or out,*

*High or low.*

*And the constancy of your loving*

*Is the eternal relationship*

*In which all others find their source.*



## Jesus: the Alpha and the Omega

REVELATION 1:5B-8

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

*Look, he is coming with the clouds,  
and every eye will see him,  
even those who pierced him;  
and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him.  
So shall it be! Amen.*

*'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'*

The Advent season is a time for looking back. We look back to the start of all things and remember that Jesus Christ has been at work from the very beginning. He was there at creation, and the very life of the planet emanates from him. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning' (John 1:1-2).

The Advent season is a time for looking around us. As we wonder at all that Christ is doing in and among his people, we recognize that in some mysterious way he is working his purposes out all around us. And we see only a glimpse of what he is doing right now, for he is moving in ways far beyond our understanding. 'In him all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17).

But perhaps most of all, the Advent season is a time for looking forward. It's a time to recognize that Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end of everything. His purposes are working towards an ending and a conclusion.

The famous preacher Leslie Weatherhead gathered congregations of many hundreds at the famous City Temple church in London every week. Looking back over forty years of ministry, he wondered at how God's purposes were being worked out through it all. He wrote:

*Man's heart trembles for fear at the very discoveries of power which he himself has made. Belief in God seems often on the wane and men wonder what the end will be. The Christian message is that the climax of history will be worthy of the Creator, that a strong hand is in control, that the string of events we call history will not end in meaninglessness, or run out like a stream in the desert, but that Christ will reign and his promises be fulfilled.*

OVER HIS OWN SIGNATURE, EPWORTH PRESS, 1955

Many people look to the future of the planet with uncertainty, and even with fear. They talk with depressing urgency about the way that everything is getting worse, and fear that tomorrow can only be inferior to today. But those of us who are Christians have turned over the last page of history. We know the end of the story. And we know that Jesus is there in victory at the end of all things!

The late Dr Donald English once told a story I've never forgotten. He was taken to a wrestling match by his son to see an international contest. He described the experience in vivid detail, and described a particular bout which ran completely out of control.

A wrestler, dressed all in black and with an evil-looking mask, beat his smaller opponent to the ground. He refused to obey the referee, and continued to attack his prey with ferocious force. When the referee tried to intervene, this wrestler threw him out of the ring. No one was there to help, and it seemed that evil was victorious.

But then, without warning, the famous wrestler 'Big Daddy' strode down the aisle and mounted the ring. He cast out the black-hooded fighter, brought the referee back into the ring, and helped the beaten man to his feet. Order was restored, evil was vanquished, good was victorious.

Dr English didn't need to expound the story. The meaning was clear. The Omega had arrived.



*'Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.'*

REVELATION 22:12-13

The book of Revelation is the completion of the book of Genesis. In Genesis we read of the creation of the old heavens and earth, of Satan's first deeds, of human beings cast out of paradise and of the new dominance of sin and death.

In Revelation we read of a new heaven and earth, of Satan cast into hell, believers entering paradise and the destruction of sin and death. The Omega has arrived!

As you look out on the start of a new day, welcome him as the Alpha and beginning, and commit the day to him. And at the end of the day, recognize that he is the Omega and the ending, and offer it to him. As you begin a new project, invite him in at the start... and, when it's over, thank him at the end. Recognize that your life isn't just a random sequence of incidents, events and meetings. You are part of the significant flow of beginnings and endings which is the will of Christ.

Advent is a time to rejoice that he is working his purposes out through the days of our lives and that on the last day we will see the culmination of all his wonderful work in us.

Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch Christian who spent some dark years in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, was once making an intricate needlework pattern. She held it up for all to see, and it was just a jumble of threads and colours.

'Look at this,' she said. 'It makes no sense at all. It looks like life!' But then she turned the needlework over, and revealed a beautifully threaded pattern which spelt 'God is love'. 'One day,' she said. 'we'll see it from the side of the One to whom it all makes sense!'

Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He is taking the tangled threads of our lives and weaving them into his perfect will. He is taking the confusing strands of who we are and fusing them into the purposes of his love. This Advent, let's discover that there is an ending! Let's run with excitement towards the finishing-line! Let's recognize that when we get there, he will be there to meet us!

## Prayer

*My Father, I am so thankful that you have no beginning and no end! That you dwell outside the limits of time, in eternity. You know how easily I'm weighted down by the 'urgent' things that occupy my time and keep me from living with eternity in view. Create in me today a sense of your eternal life and love. Lift my sights above this thin, fragile, passing ribbon of time and set my foot on the solid granite path to eternity.*

DAVID HAZARD, *EARLY WILL I SEEK YOU*, BETHANY HOUSE PUBLISHERS, 1991, p.67





**Week Five**

## **JESUS—NO GREATER LOVE**

In these special days of Christmas week, we glimpse that Jesus came on earth to express God's love—to be and to do far more than we can ever begin to understand.



## Jesus: the Saviour

LUKE 2:9-11

*An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'*

Time and again we read this famous extract from the Christmas story, but how often do we pause to reflect on its meaning? What did God's messenger really mean when he announced the coming of a new born Saviour?

I believe that there are four ideas which we must grasp to appreciate why Jesus came as Saviour.

### All, not some

The Bible teaches that all of us have sinned and have failed to live the kind of lives that please God. For some people, this is difficult to accept.

When I was visiting homes as part of a mission in Northern Ireland and trying to explain the Christian message, one very pompous lady declared, 'Are you implying that I am a sinner?'

I was. Because that is the Christian message. We've all failed, no matter how religious or righteous we've been. Unless I recognize that I am a sinner, and that I have deeply offended God in my thoughts, words and deeds, I can never understand the angel's good news about a Saviour.

Jesus mixed with outcasts, sinners, prostitutes and traitors because these were the very people who recognized their need of a Saviour! He taught that it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but

those who recognize that they are sick: 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Luke 5:32).

### Grace, not disgrace

The Bible also teaches that Jesus did not come to humiliate us or to disgrace us, but to rescue us from our predicament.

In the wonderful stories of the woman who lost her precious wedding coin, the shepherd who lost his sheep, and the father who lost his son, we get an insight into the kind of compassion and care that he has for each of us:

*'For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.'*

LUKE 19:10

When the angel announced the arrival of a Saviour, he was declaring the good news that Christ had come on earth not to condemn us, but to rescue us, to find us, and to save us. He is a Saviour who pours undeserved love upon us.

### Love, not law

Those who think they can save themselves by their religious duty, their good works in the world or their 'nice' demeanour are much mistaken.

Several years ago, I was stranded in the middle of a large lake on a windsurfer. The wind had taken me briskly across the water, but then I was becalmed. Time and again I stood on the slippery board; again and again I fell off into the freezing water.

At last a little motor-boat arrived with the word 'Rescue' emblazoned in red letters across its hull. The boatman told me to lie prostrate on the board while he towed me to safety. There was nothing I could do but put my life in his hands.

Jesus came into the world as Saviour, because he came to do what we can never do. He came to bring us back into relationship with God, forgive us our sins, and to set us off in a new direction. Michael Green sums it up:

*He condemned the wickedness of human beings, and took the condemnation in his own person. He faced up to the poison in*



*human hearts, and drank the bitter cup of death himself. He did not pretend that our debts to him were not astronomical: but he paid for them out of his own account, and it crushed him. Is that not the most incredible love?*

WHO IS THIS JESUS? HODDER, 1990

### **Salvation, not condemnation**

What a dramatic scene ensued when the Pharisees discovered a woman having an adulterous affair. They dragged her (not the man!) to Jesus and asked that she be stoned.

While the Pharisees pointed at the woman caught in adultery, demanded that she be stoned, and publicly humiliated her, Jesus welcomed her, forgave her, and let her go free. 'Go, and sin no more,' he said (John 8:3-11).

Our gutter press and tabloid headlines proclaim the gospel of the pointed finger. They are for ever humiliating those who have sinned. It's a gospel of public disgrace, a gospel of public condemnation and public humiliation.

This is not Christ's way. When those who have fallen turn to him, he picks up the pieces of their shattered lives and begins the work of salvation. It's a gospel of hope, a gospel of forgiveness, a gospel of new beginnings. That's why the angel was bringing such good news! That's why Christmas should be such a joyful time! It's about the arrival of someone to rescue us, to save us, to set us free.

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

JOHN 3:16-17

No longer do we look to the future with despair or fear of judgment. No longer need we carry the burden of guilt and failure. We can ask him to save us and to forgive us and to bring us into a beautiful new relationship with God which will make life worthwhile!

So, happy Christmas! Happy Saviour's Day!

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,

I recognize that I have

failed,

sinned,

screwed up.

I recognize that you came

to rescue me,

to save me,

to find me.

Come into my life

as my Saviour.

For in you alone

do I put my trust.

Amen



## Jesus: the Good Shepherd

LUKE 2:8-12

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

It is poignant that some of the first people to be told of Christ's coming were shepherds. They were not the wealthy powerbrokers of his generation; in fact, they were often considered the lowest of the low. Perhaps shepherds held a special place in God's heart.

For generations, the Jews had regarded God as the true Shepherd of the people of Israel (see Psalm 80 and Ezekiel 34:12). The writer of Psalm 23 also compared him to the good shepherd. This Shepherd God leads his people along a true path—the path that leads to the house of the Lord and to a table prepared (Psalm 23:5-6). It might be hard and rugged at times, and it might lead through wilderness, but he walks it with us every step of the way.

The prophets also saw the Messiah as someone who had the same qualities of care and compassion as a good shepherd. Isaiah wrote:

***See the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.***

ISAIAH 40:10-11

Jesus Christ fulfilled this great prophecy. He was the good shepherd, who cared for each lost sheep so passionately that he was willing to give his life for them, that they might find safety, shelter and redemption. (See Luke 15:4-7 for the parable of the lost sheep.)

Jesus himself laid claim to the title of good shepherd. It was a further indication of his claim to divinity. Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep' (John 10:14-15).

But what's all this to do with our lives today? How can we experience him and know him as the good shepherd in our everyday lives? Here are three important clues.

### He won't run away

The good shepherd fulfilled many important roles in the life of the flock in his care. Most important of all, however, was that a shepherd stayed with his flock. No matter what dangers were ahead, or what wild animals approached, the good shepherd stayed put.

Jesus explained to his disciples that he wasn't like a hired hand, scampering off into the darkness at the first sight of trouble (John 10:12). He could be trusted to stay put and to care for those who followed him through thick and thin.

It's good to know that whatever circumstances we face in our lives today, and no matter what fears, failures or frustrations the future may hold, he will not leave us. He is the good shepherd, and the good shepherd never leaves his sheep.

### He goes on ahead

In the time of Jesus, a good shepherd always went before the flock. Unlike the shepherds in rural England who drive their sheep from the rear using whistles and sheepdogs, the shepherds of Jesus' time went on ahead. Such was the sense of trust among the sheep that they followed the familiar call of the shepherd's voice.

Stephen Haboush, who was once a shepherd in Galilee, used to lead his sheep down the ancient road known as the 'Valley of Fire'. It was 500 feet below sea level and very hot. It was a dangerous place, stalked by robbers and wild beasts. He wrote:



*I would dread leading the sheep through this valley, but it was necessary whenever new pasture ground must be sought on the other side. My sheep would sense the danger and gather closely to my side. My continual calling and the sense of my presence gave them confidence and allayed their fear.*

*MY SHEPHERD LIFE IN GALILEE, HARPERS*

It's important to remember that Jesus is also going on ahead of us. He's checking the way, identifying the green pasture, watching out for wild animals, and calling us ever onward.

### **He is our peace**

Shepherds say that when sheep are troubled they look up to see if the shepherd is near. If they can't see him, they become uneasy and are liable to panic. In Galilee today, a shepherd will still fix a staff to the ground and place his coat around it with his headgear on the top to assure the sheep that he is near.

There is much to alarm and frighten us in this fast changing and stressful society today. But there is one who can breathe calm and peace into any situation. Jesus said, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand' (John 10:27-28).

It is this voice that we know, and this voice that we must follow. It is this voice that reassures us that, even though the world may be collapsing all around us, all will be well.

### **Meditation**

*The King of love my Shepherd is,  
Whose goodness faileth never;  
I nothing lack if I am his  
And he is mine for ever.*

*Where streams of living water flow  
My ransomed soul he leadeth,  
And where the verdant pastures grow  
With food celestial feedeth.*

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,  
But yet in love he sought me,  
And on his shoulder gently laid,  
And home rejoicing brought me.*

*HENRY WILLIAMS BAKER (1821-77)*



## Jesus: Fulfiller of the Law

LUKE 2:29-32

'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.'

One of my favourite characters in the Christmas story is Simeon. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon about him, and I've certainly never seen him depicted on a Christmas card. Yet, for me, he is one of the unsung heroes of this special season. He really was prepared to meet Jesus Christ.

Imagine this old man, near to death, lingering in the courts of the temple in Jerusalem, waiting for the Messiah. God had promised him that he wouldn't die before he saw the Christ. Sure enough, he wasn't disappointed. On the eighth day after their child was born, Mary and Joseph arrived at the temple to circumcise him and to name him Jesus.

Imagine the scene as Mary and Joseph, exhausted by their journey, and already confused by all that had happened in Bethlehem, arrived for this special ceremony. The old man shuffled toward them, took the baby in his arms, and declared that he was the long-awaited 'salvation'.

In the Jewish religion, there were three things that you had to do to find 'salvation'. You had to go to Jerusalem during the great festivals. You had to keep the Sabbath holy and go to the synagogue to learn from the religious leaders. And you had to study the Law and obey every jot and tittle of it. It was a religion of doing, a salvation of works.

The prophets had been looking forward to a different kind of salvation for centuries. They had already glimpsed that one day God would usher in a new beginning for humankind. There would be a salvation based on knowing God rather than on obeying the law:

*'This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time,' declares the Lord. 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' declares the Lord.*

JEREMIAH 31:33-34

Jesus came to bring us out of the guilt and failure that the Law created. He didn't come to destroy the Law, but to fulfil it. He came to show that we can live lives which are pleasing to God, not by a slavishness to the Law, but through liberating faith in him:

*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.*

ROMANS 3:21-22

This was vividly illustrated on the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus, transfigured by the dazzling purity of God, talked with Elijah representing the prophets, and Moses representing the Law. He had not come to destroy what they taught, but to complete it. He came to show that through his life, all that God had revealed in the past could be brought to its culmination. It's a righteousness that develops through an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ: 'Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes' (Romans 10:4).

Some of us need to stand where Simeon stood. We need to see that God has opened up a new way for us to reach him through a newborn baby called Jesus. We're not saved through a religion of ceremonial correctness, of slavish obedience to rules and regulations, or of



learning religious dogma. We're saved through faith in Christ and in him alone. This is a religion of relationship, not ritual; of love, not law; of celebration, not ceremonial.

When I was visiting one of our mission teams in a North Yorkshire fishing village, I was introduced to an old sea-captain. He had travelled the world and seen it all! Now, at the end of his life, he had more time to reflect, to think and to pray. He told me that the young people on the mission team had been an enormous challenge to him. He confessed that his lifelong commitment to God had been based on fear, on law and on religious observance. One of the young Christians on the team had led the old man to Christ.

Like Simeon, hovering in the outer courts of the temple, the old sea-captain had discovered—after a lifetime of religious duty—that God had prepared a new way, a different way—a way through knowing him and loving him, a way of being known by him and being loved by him.

This Christmas, let's turn our backs on all forms of empty religiosity, of dead ceremonial, of slavish legalism. Let's look at Jesus again, and come back to that simple appreciation of his love which is at the heart of true Christianity.

### Prayer

*Dear Lord Jesus Christ,  
Help me to know you  
rather than dead religion.  
Help me to love you  
rather than empty ceremonies.  
Help me to serve you  
rather than rules and regulations.  
Write your law on my mind  
and in my heart.  
Amen*

## Jesus: Good News

LUKE 1:50-53

'His mercy extends to those who fear him,  
from generation to generation.  
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;  
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.  
He has brought down rulers from their thrones  
but has lifted up the humble.  
He has filled the hungry with good things  
but has sent the rich away empty.'

Increasingly, the Christmas period is becoming a major opportunity for travel and holidays. Every year newscasts carry pictures of crowded airport terminals and congested roads as people head off to the snow or the sun.

For many people, Christmas is a time to buy their Schillings, francs, dollars or Marks. Arriving at a foreign destination with no currency can be a stressful experience.

I once arrived in Warsaw very early one morning and I had no zloty, the local currency. I remember walking around the icy Central Station with a sheaf of ten-pound notes in my pocket, but I couldn't buy a cup of coffee because I didn't have the right currency.

The currency of our new-millennial, post-modern society is the currency of power, wealth, fame and influence, and it's a currency that many of us deal in each day, though we may hardly dare to recognize it.

When Jesus came on earth, however, he refused to deal in the currencies of this world. He dealt in the currency of heaven. Right from the outset, Mary had prophesied that the Messiah would deal in a different coinage. In the Magnificat, her beautiful prophecy about



Jesus, Mary took us to the heart of who God is. She revealed the character of the One who was to visit earth and the currency in which he would deal.

Mary foretold that the coming Messiah would not deal in the power structures of human politics, or in the money markets of the prosperous. He would turn things on their head and reveal his compassionate care for the powerless, the humble and the hungry.

Her prophecy was dramatically fulfilled when Jesus returned to his boyhood home of Nazareth, unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and read the familiar words to a startled congregation:

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

LUKE 4:18-19

Following the reading, Jesus said, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). Jesus not only preached good news, he embodied it. He left glory for obscurity. He left heaven for a stable. He left paradise to become a refugee.

All through his earthly ministry, Jesus challenged the powerful. The Romans demanded total allegiance. The wealthy landowning Sadducees demanded support. The power-hungry Zealots demanded revolution. But he wouldn't side with any of them. He simply refused to support their dissenting claims.

Instead, he invited anyone who wished to discover the Kingdom to 'leave self behind, take up his cross and follow me' (Matthew 16:24). His was a currency of sacrifice, of humility and of meekness. That's why it threatened the established power structures, interest groups and political pressure groups of his day.

How fitting it was, then, that Mary rode into Bethlehem on a donkey. How fitting that, thirty-three years later, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. His Kingdom was not to be ushered in by a war-horse or a chariot but in the simplicity and humility of an everyday donkey.

The Jesus Kingdom, then, cannot be built on the currencies of this

world. His authority does not depend on the currencies of power, money or military might. His Kingdom is good news to the poor because access to his Kingdom cannot be gained through the normal power structures of the world. It can only be entered with a broken and a contrite heart, a hunger for God and a desire for truth and justice.

Sister Eva Hayman had retired and was living in a convent in Wales. Night after night she had a dream, and it was always the same. She saw Jesus surrounded by young men and women dying of Aids in squalid circumstances in London. At last, unable to rid herself of the dream, she shared it with her Mother Superior and asked how she should respond. The Reverend Mother simply invited her to go to London and 'be Jesus' to those she'd seen in the dream.

A wonderful ministry of compassionate service began, and from it many lives have been touched, blessed and transformed. It's not a ministry based on the currencies of money, fame, power or influence but on the good news of the love of Jesus.

Jesus continues to be good news to the world whenever we reach out to others in his name and, disregarding the currencies of our day, deal in his currency of love, sacrifice and compassion. Whenever we use this currency, we pour the riches of heaven out on to earth and build up treasures for ourselves which can never be devalued.

We join him in being good news to a hurting world.

### Prayer

*Dear Lord Jesus,*

*Forgive me that I deal in the currencies of the world:*

*that fame attracts me,*

*that power tempts me,*

*that money seduces me.*

*Make me a dealer in the currency of heaven,*

*That my life might be spent*

*in compassion,*

*in service,*

*in care...*

*And that I, like you, might be good news for the world.*

*Amen*



## The Suffering Jesus

HEBREWS 4:15-16

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Several years ago, I went to a 'barn rally'. It was an unusual experience to preach in a barn to the accompanying sounds of livestock! Over a hundred young people were seated on bales of straw, and as the sun set, the harsh lights cast long shadows across the cattle stalls alongside.

After the meeting was over, and only the farmer and I remained, we stood quietly looking over into one of the straw-filled pens and at the cattle within. 'It never ceases to amaze me,' he said, 'that God should come on earth to a place like this.'

We have sanitized Advent and cleaned up Christmas, but the raw reality of the coming of Jesus is startling and disturbing. The fact that he was born in a stable and not a palace is significant. His was a ministry about suffering, not status; about hardship, not luxury. The Christmas message is that he has come to share our sorrows and to enter our pain. He has come to share the raw experiences of human life from the inside rather than from the outside looking in. This, indeed, is the reason for the season.

*But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

LUKE 2:10-12

I once visited a minister who was very ill in a Croydon hospital. For many years he had been the chaplain at the hospital but now, weakened by leukaemia, he was a patient. As I entered the ward he strolled towards me, beaming a great smile of welcome.

'In all my years as a hospital chaplain,' he confided, 'I never realized what it was like to be stuck in here. I used to breeze in and out and say nice things to people, but I was always on the outside looking in. But now, you see, I'm on the inside, too. I get woken up at some ungodly hour. I suffer those wretched transfusions every day. I don't know what the future holds—I'm going through the mill like everyone else. Because of that, the other patients let me get close to them, and let me pray with them. I've done more as a patient here in a few weeks than in years of hospital chaplaincy.'

He saw his time in hospital as a parable of the incarnation, for Jesus lives on the inside, too. Bishop David Sheppard once said, 'The incarnation meant truly entering into a world where there was indignation, corrupt authority, sickness, adultery, betrayal, agony and bloody sweat. If we believe that God is really incarnate, he is frighteningly close; he meets us where we are' (*With Hope in our Hearts*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1994).

When Jesus stepped on to the stage of world history, he was no longer on the outside looking in. He wasn't like a general visiting the front-line on a tour of inspection: he shared the fox-holes, he faced the enemy fire, he knew what it was to be wounded on the front-line.

Jesus knew what it was to grieve: when he discovered that Lazarus was dead, he wept. He knew what it was to be tempted, for he wrestled with the devil in the wilderness. He knew what it was to grapple with the will of God, for in Gethsemane he agonized over the cost of obedience. He knew what it was to suffer, for they tortured him and beat him and led him up Calvary to a cross.

He even knew hell, for in a moment of dark separation from his Father he felt forsaken. There was no dark depth of human experience that he did not plumb as he walked his earthly journey to the cross.

This Christmas, let Jesus into your hurts and sorrows. Know that he shares them with you. For, more than any other, he understands.



## Meditation

*The nurse went up a flight of stairs,  
The hallway rang with noise.  
The smell of disinfectant filled the air,  
I turned into the ward—  
And looked along the row of beds,  
And saw the face I knew.*

*The eyes were different now,  
Sullen,  
Sad,  
And dry.  
I could not speak.  
No word was adequate.*

*I went and took the thin white hand in mine,  
And touched the agony.  
A jarring shock ran through my soul,  
And time stood still.*

*I shrank away defeated  
Asking... why?  
I cannot understand.  
A picture fills my mind.  
A vivid picture of a bloodstained cross.  
A voice cries out through time,  
My God... my God... why?  
Lord Jesus, you have gone before.  
Give me your strength,  
To shout through my confusion...  
Thy will be done.*

30 DECEMBER

## Jesus: the Sacrifice

ROMANS 5:6-8

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

In the rather violent Spielberg movie *Saving Private Ryan*, a team of battle-weary soldiers led by Tom Hanks are selected from the beaches of Normandy to undertake a strange mission. They must leave the main thrust of the invasion, penetrate deep into enemy territory, and try to find a paratrooper called Ryan. Why? Because all his brothers are dead, and the Chief-of-Staff feels obliged to return at least one son to a grieving mother.

During a particularly dangerous and violent part of their mission, the soldiers stop and question their captain about the value of their mission. 'What if Ryan's not worth it?'

Today, ask yourself, would you be worth someone giving up their life for, sacrificing themselves for, dying for? And then pause, and take a look at the cross.

When Jesus chose to leave the heights of heaven and to be born in a humble stable—to move from paradise to poverty—he made a choice of sacrifice for you.

When Jesus chose to live a life of total obedience to his heavenly Father—a life that led to rejection, to exclusion and to suffering—he made a choice of sacrifice for you.

When Jesus chose to go to the cross—a conscious choice made with tears of anguish in the garden of Gethsemane, a decision with painful implications—he made a choice of sacrifice for you.



But when Jesus hung on the cross and, in one dark moment of dereliction, took upon himself the sin of the world, he didn't only make a choice of sacrifice. When he knew separation from his Father and tasted hell, he didn't only make a choice of sacrifice. There, on Calvary, he actually *became* a sacrifice for you.

The mystery of this act is indescribable, incomprehensible, inconceivable. Yet, ultimately, the passion and the intensity of that act make it the most momentous event in human history, and mark Jesus out as the most significant person who ever lived.

The more I have wrestled with the complexity of this sacrifice, the more I have tried to make sense of it, the more I have tried to bring it within the orbit of my understanding... the more awesome it has become!

It's amazing because it's *personal*. His sacrifice was for everyone in the world, but, best of all, it was just for you. Even if you were the only person alive on the planet, he would have travelled that road, offered up his life and made that sacrifice—just for you.

It's amazing because it's *permanent*. The priests in the temple had to go about their work of slaying animals and burning offerings day in and day out. The people had to return again and again in the hope that through sacrificial offerings they might gain forgiveness. Yet what happened on the cross that dark Good Friday was a once-and-for-all sacrifice, an offering so momentous that it would last for ever—just for you.

It's amazing because it's *perfect*. It was made by a perfect Saviour for an imperfect person like you. It gives you, in one single offering, all that's needed to open up the way for your forgiveness, and for you to discover a real relationship with the heavenly Father.

God's forgiveness can never be deserved, never earned, never bought. No—it's something given. It's free. It's gratis. It comes when we recognize that we are powerless to save ourselves. We can only throw ourselves on to the grace communicated through a sacrifice, a cross and the words, 'Father, forgive them.'

So, take heart—you are worth it. He paid the price to prove it!

## Prayer

*Lord of the universe,  
You stride among the galaxies,  
And view the endless train of planets  
Shining to infinity.  
Yet one tiny light,  
Tinged with blue,  
Stands out from all the rest.  
For this was home to you  
The day you left your paradise,  
Traded your cloak of stars  
for a wooden cross,  
Exchanged power for powerlessness,  
heaven for earth,  
bliss for pain.  
Remember us, this day,  
And give us our daily bread,  
That we might have enough...  
And to share.*



## Jesus: the Dawn

REVELATION 22:16-17

*'I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.' The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' And let him who hears say, 'Come!' Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.*

The people of Israel felt pessimistic about their future when Jesus was born. They were a people under foreign domination, and there seemed no prospect of freedom. They were a people who'd been waiting for the Messiah for centuries, and he still hadn't come. It was into this dark gloom that Zechariah delivered his great prophecy on the day that John the Baptist was named. He said, 'The rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace' (Luke 1:78-79).

Zechariah could see that the nation's long years of praying and generations of waiting were nearly over—the darkness was beginning to recede, the dawn was about to break! No wonder he was elated—it was getting light!

This prophet could see that the coming of Jesus into the world was like the coming of a new dawn. His bright presence would shine over all the earth, and his radiant love would transform even the darkest places!

Of all the daybreaks I've seen in my life, there's one I'll never forget. One morning I stood on the Salt Sea in the Sahara Desert and felt wrapped around by the deep darkness. At first there was a tiny glint of red light across the horizon, and within minutes the sky was transformed into a pallet of golds, reds and yellows that glistened and reflected across the salt crystals as far as the eye could see. The sun's

brilliant rays transformed everything. That's just how Zechariah saw that the coming of Jesus could affect the world!

Today, many have chosen to ignore the daybreak that Zechariah could see so clearly. They can see only darkness and are pessimistic about the future. Such observers and commentators look to the future of the planet with dark foreboding. They can see no promise of dawn. Sir Kenneth Clark once wrote, 'Confident articles on the future seem to me, intellectually, the most disreputable forms of public utterance' (*Civilisation*, J. Murray, 1969)

Gordon Rattray Taylor commented, 'Current indications are that the world is bent on going to hell in a hard-cart, and that is probably what it will do!' (*Biological Time Bomb*, 1968)

The folk singer Joan Baez, in one of her very melancholic 1960s hits ('The Hitchhikers' Song') declared, 'You are the orphans in an age of no tomorrows', and the songwriter Norman O. Brown summed up this mood of pessimism when he wrote, 'Today, even the survival of humanity is a utopian hope.'

Walker Perry, writing in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987, p. 75), observed that for the first time in three centuries the young people of today don't believe that we'll be able to solve the problems of the planet. They don't even dare to hope that their lives will be better than those of their parents.

Sadly, some Christians seem to be caught up in the same mood of apathy and despair. There is a brand of belief within Christianity, sometimes called 'pre-millennialism', which suggests that the world will get worse and worse before Christ returns. Taken to extremes, this idea is dangerous, offering no hope and no future. This pre-millennial view of the world found its most violent and disastrous expression in a small American town called Waco and in an event known around the world as the Waco massacre.

David Koresh and his followers were extreme 'pre-millennialists'. They understood themselves to be the righteous community of God. They feared that they would shortly undergo a period of suffering and martyrdom at the hands of a wicked world, and sensed that they were on the verge of a terrifying 'great tribulation'. They believed that hatred and evil would dominate the world. Iwan Russell-Jones, a BBC television producer who visited Waco, concluded:



*What unites the pre-millennialists is their bleak estimation of human history, their belief that God has abandoned the world to its satanic fate. If the pre-millennialists are right, then I have to say, I don't want anything to do with their God. This is a deeply immoral God, a puppet master, playing with his creatures on the stage of world history.*

FIRST LIGHT MAGAZINE, 1997

On 19 April 1993, those eighty men, women and children who despaired of the future of the world were consumed by fire as their home lay besieged by the FBI. They had been expecting the apocalypse, and sure enough it came, but not quite how they had predicted it. They lived their worst nightmare.

When Professor Dan McGee of Baylor University in Waco left his house to appear on CBS the morning after the burning of the Waco community, he suddenly understood where the 'Branch Davidians' had gone wrong: 'As I went out of my house, it was still dark. The birds were just beginning to sing. And I thought to myself, that's what the Branch Davidians were unable to do. The world was so dark for them that they couldn't hear the birds singing.'

The people of Waco failed to understand that God's answer to evil in the world is not in military or in physical conquest, but in taking the suffering upon himself. He invites Christians to do the same, and to stay and fight the battle with faith and hope. He invites us to hear the birds singing—even in the darkness just before dawn.

Zechariah saw Jesus as the Dawn—a fulfilment of the hopes and dreams of the people of Israel in their promised Messiah. The writer of Revelation sees him as the Morning Star, the one who heralds another new dawn—a dawn at the end of human history. This new dawn will herald an age when all the old things will pass away and the Kingdom of God will come at last.

If you feel pessimistic about the future, may I invite you to hear the birds singing? It's nearly dawn. Jesus will return to usher in the final daybreak. It will be a day when...

*The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will*

*be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*

REVELATION 22:3-5

### Prayer

*Lord Jesus Christ,*

*When I fear that the darkness will overwhelm me,  
Help me focus on the Morning Star.*

*Help me to hear the birds singing in the darkness,  
And know that your new dawn will surely come.*

*Amen*



**Week Six**

## **JESUS—TOWARDS TOMORROW**

As we enter a new year, we look at how our  
relationship with Jesus affects who we are and  
how we live.



## Jesus: Lord

LUKE 2:11-12

*'Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

The angel told the shepherds that the baby born in a manger in Bethlehem was 'Christ the Lord'. It must have been a confusing message. Who would have expected 'the Lord' to be born in a lowly stable? It didn't really make sense.

But Jesus came to show that being Lord in the Kingdom of God meant something very different to lordship in the kingdoms of this world! Lordship in the Kingdom of God meant a borrowed stable and a borrowed tomb, and no place to lay his head between the two.

When the mother of James and John asked if her sons could be great in the Kingdom of God, Jesus made it clear that having authority in his Kingdom had nothing to do with status. It was about suffering, service and obedience.

Time and again in his ministry Jesus demonstrated that his Lordship had nothing to do with ego or status. John's Gospel describes a meal where Jesus and his own disciples met together. There was no slave to wash their feet and none of the disciples was keen to volunteer. The smelly filth of the Eastern streets was stuck between their toes and they were ceremonially defiled. During the meal, Jesus got up and removed his outer garment. He took a towel, poured water into a basin, and began to wash his disciples' feet. He did the menial task that none of his followers wanted to do.

*'Do you understand what I have done for you?' he asked them. 'You call me "Teacher" and "Lord", and rightly so, for that is what*

*I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet.'*

JOHN 13:12-14

Even at the last supper, when Jesus broke bread with his disciples for the last time, the same old question of self-importance arose again (Luke 22:24). Jesus had to make it clear that ambition, pride and a desire to lord it over others had no place in his Kingdom:

*'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.'*

LUKE 22:25-26

Jesus is frequently addressed as 'Lord' in the Gospels, so what did it mean? The Greek word *kurie* used in this way had a diverse range of meanings. It was commonly used as a courtesy, as we might use the word 'sir'. A scholar would use it to address his teacher, a servant his master, a slave his owner, a subject his emperor or a worshipper his god.

William Barclay, reviewing the complicated range of meanings for 'kurie', or 'Lord', concluded:

*In the days of his flesh no one fully knew who Jesus was; it took the resurrection and the descent of the Spirit to reveal his full majesty and wonder. It would indeed be a reasonable working rule to say that 'kurie', when applied to Jesus in the days of his flesh, practically always means 'Sir' or 'Master', while 'kurie' applied to Jesus after the resurrection practically always means Lord.*

*JESUS AS THEY SAW HIM*, SCM PRESS, 1962

This is clearly illustrated in Christ's resurrection appearance to Thomas. The 'doubting disciple' could not believe that Jesus had risen from the dead. When Thomas went to see the disciples, he met the risen Jesus, who invited him to see his wounds and to touch his



nail-scarred hands. There, at last, Thomas fully recognized who Jesus was and declared, 'My Lord and my God!' he had discovered the true meaning of Jesus the 'kurie'.

Several years ago, I visited the Wilberforce Museum in Hull. It portrayed the growth of the slave trade in Britain in many graphic ways. The exhibition also conveyed something of the suffering and humiliation endured by those who were slaves. In one imaginative exhibit, I stood on a plinth and was 'sold at auction' to a crowd of eager bargain-hunters. I understood for the first time something of what it meant to be a slave and to be owned by someone else. I understood what it was to have someone as my 'lord'.

When we truly understand what it means to make Jesus the 'Lord' of our lives, it must deeply affect how we live. It means giving him all that we have, all that we are and all that we hope to become. It means inviting him to lead us, to guide us, and to own us.

Jesus warned that there would be many who would call him 'Lord', but few who would really understand what it meant. It's much the same today. It's easy to call Jesus 'Lord', but it's much harder to work out the implications of that in the way we think, live and act.

In his book *Over His Own Signature* (Epworth Press, 1955), the preacher Leslie Weatherhead struggled to understand what it means to meet Christ as Lord. He wrote:

*I cannot quibble as to whether he should be called 'the Son of God', or the 'Supreme Revelation of God', or 'the Word made flesh', or 'the Incarnation of God'. Men may call him 'Avatar' or 'Logos', or what they will. For me no 'merely human' category is big enough to hold him.*

In making Jesus the Lord of our lives, we recognize that he is our God, and that his greatness can never be fully understood. We recognize that because of what he did for us on Calvary, we owe him everything. It's got nothing to do with status and everything to do with servanthood.

When we make Jesus the Lord of our lives, we accept his invitation to drink from the cup of suffering, to carry the towel of service and to wear the yoke of obedience. New Year is an important time for

recognizing what the Lordship of Jesus really means, and for re-ordering our priorities for the future.

Today, let's submit every area of our lives to him and recognize his ownership of us as his disciples. Let's make him the Lord of our family, our work, our possessions, our ambitions and our future. Let's become the slaves of Christ and discover the freedom he promises us. Let's lose our lives for his sake and discover who we really are.

Over the New Year period, ask yourself, is Jesus your Lord?

### Prayer

*Breathe, O breathe Thy loving Spirit*

*Into every troubled breast!*

*Let us all in Thee inherit,*

*Let us find Thy promised rest.*

*Take away the love of sinning,*

*Alpha and Omega be;*

*End of faith, as its beginning.*

*Set our hearts at liberty.*

CHARLES WESLEY



## Jesus: Immanuel

ISAIAH 7:13-14

*Then Isaiah said, 'Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough for you to try the patience of men? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.'*

MATTHEW 1:22-23

*All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us'.*

Isaiah prophesied that God would send a sign. A virgin would bear a son called 'Immanuel', a descriptive title which means 'God is with us'. It's a title that many of us will come across in Bible readings and hymns around this time of year, but what does it mean for us today?

Some years ago, I was walking through Derbyshire with a crowd of teenagers when we reached a high point looking over a valley. It's called 'Surprise View' because, reputedly, Queen Victoria paused there in a coach and declared, 'What a surprise!'

One of the young people, who'd recently become a Christian, said, 'A few weeks ago it felt like I was walking through that valley on my own, and God was distant, far away on the hills. But since I found Jesus, it's like God has come down from the hilltop to walk through the valley with me.'

I don't think I've ever heard a better definition of 'Immanuel... God is with us'. The coming of Jesus into the world in Bethlehem is all about God stepping into our human condition. He comes to be with us in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Too often, however, we hunger for his presence only when we're facing big needs, dark experiences or bad troubles. It's as though 'Immanuel' only applies when we're in a tricky situation and desperately need help. This, however, is plainly not what 'Immanuel' is supposed to mean! If we know Jesus as 'Immanuel... God with us' it should apply to the whole of our lives, not just those times when we need some extra help.

One of the directors of an international youth ministry movement told me, 'One of the characteristics of post-modernism is that young Christians seem to be able to compartmentalize their thinking. They seem to live certain aspects of their lives as 'out-and-out Christians' whilst other compartments seem impervious to his presence.'

This kind of lifestyle accepts that God is with us, but only when we find it convenient or appropriate or helpful. But that's not the real message of the gospel! When Jesus comes to us as Immanuel, he comes to engage with all of who we are, not just carefully selected segments! He comes to discover us in our hiding-place.

When my kids were young, they used to love playing hide and seek. We played it in the garden, in the house, and in parks around our neighbourhood. Once, when we were playing hide and seek at a Christian camp in Devon, one of the adults hid so well that we didn't find him! Eventually the game had to be abandoned because we got so worried. He had found an excellent hiding-place in some very long grass. Sadly, many of us have found excellent hiding-places in real life.

The Hollywood actor Robert Duvall described his most difficult role as playing a Pentecostal pastor in the movie *The Apostle*. It was, indeed, a difficult role. The story told of a minister who committed murder and who had to run away. He left his wife and children. He left his beautiful home and luxury car. He left his congregation and his responsibilities. He left the community that loved him and the congregation who cared for him. He simply ran away.

It was a difficult role for Duvall because he had to enter into the struggle of a man who had run away from everything—his appearance, his identity, his past. He had become a fugitive on the run. Duvall described the most difficult scene as a sleepless night in a dark bedroom. The runaway minister is angry with God. He argues



with God all night because, although he has run away from everyone and everything, he has discovered that there's no way he can run away from God.

This scene in the film reminded me of the garden of Eden, after Adam had sinned. Adam thought he'd got away with tasting the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, and that God hadn't noticed. When he heard footsteps, however, he knew that he'd done wrong. He knew that God had seen him, for God had been with him all the time:

*The Lord called out to the man (Adam) and asked, 'Where are you?' The man answered, 'I was naked, and when I heard you walking through the garden, I was frightened and hid!'*

GENESIS 3:9-10 (CEV)

Christmas, then, is a time to celebrate that 'Immanuel... God is with us' in our troubles and traumas. But it's also a time to recognize that he's with us in our temptations and failures too. We may be able to fool everyone else, but we can't hide from God.

When Jesus came on earth to be our 'Immanuel', he came to enter every compartment of our lives; even those we'd be ashamed for him to see. This season is a time to recognize that Jesus is with us everywhere. He's even with us in those locked compartments of our being where we think we're quite alone.

Emmanuel... He's even with us in the hiding-place!

*Then Jesus' disciples said, 'Now you are speaking clearly and without figures of speech. Now we can see that you know all things' (John 16:29-30).*

### Prayer

Lord Jesus,

Help us to open up the closed compartments,

That we may welcome you into our hiding-places.

For you are Immanuel...

And you are with us everywhere.

3 JANUARY

## Jesus: the Servant

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,  
but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

At the start of a new year, it's good for each of us to review our priorities. It's so easy to adopt the world's agenda and to hunger for promotion, prosperity or power. Today's reading reminds us that, in the Kingdom of God, such human aspirations have no place. Paul reminds the Philippians that Jesus has set a different agenda and an alternative set of priorities.

Mrs Zebedee's meeting with Jesus was a pertinent reminder of this agenda. She came to Jesus with an unusual request. She knelt down before him and asked if her sons, James and John, could sit on the right and left side of him in his Kingdom. This had nothing to do with seating arrangements at a banquet. It was about power. She was asking, in contemporary language, if James could be his Prime Minister and John his Chancellor.

Jesus didn't reply to her but spoke directly to James and John. He'd probably guessed that such a request had originated with them! He made it clear that this was not an honour that he was in a position to bestow. Jesus went on to point out that to find status in his



Kingdom, you needed to discover a different view of life. In the Kingdom of God, the greatest are the servants, and the most important are the slaves:

*Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'*

MATTHEW 20:25-28

Jesus' whole ministry was a demonstration that 'the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve'. It's incredible that the greatest person in the Kingdom of heaven came to earth as a servant. His life expressed complete commitment to the will of God and he lived with the obedience of a slave.

The history of Christian mission shines with many bright examples of people who took Christ's teaching on servanthood seriously. As far back as the third century AD there was a Christian mission known as Cyprian's Gamblers. They undertook pieces of ministry that no one else would touch.

In AD252, for instance, there was a terrible plague in Carthage. Many lay sick and dying and the townsfolk ran away in fear of their lives. As they left the town, however, Cyprian's 'gamblers' moved in to bury the dead, nurse the sick and care for the bereaved. They risked their lives in celebration of the One who gave his life for us.

James Stringfellow once wrote:

*A Christian looks like a sucker because he is free to give his life. To die—imminently—for the sake of anyone or anything at all—even for those or that which seems unworthy of his death, thereby celebrating the one who died for all, though none be worthy, not even one!*

Some years ago, I travelled to one of the most unpleasant places on earth. It was a place called Tharaka in Kenya. We travelled by Land Rover on rough, dusty tracks for many hours, and finally had to walk down rough, overgrown bush pathways until we reached a community which was completely off the beaten track.

At the end of the track was a deep, sweltering, red dust-bowl, dry and parched all summer and a muddy quagmire all winter. At the pit of it, there was a missionary in a white flowing cassock, and a chapel, a school and an orphanage.

I will never forget the night I spent there—the house full of dust, the water running red, the whole place swarming with needy people. Nor shall I forget that missionary, whose very life seemed a tangible expression of what it means to be a servant, like the Servant-King.

At the start of a new year, it's good for us to re-order our priorities for the year ahead. Those of us who want to live the Kingdom of God in the kingdoms of this world need to take on the attitude of servants and slaves. The sacrificial values of the Kingdom of God may make us look like suckers, but in living them we celebrate his life. In losing our lives for his sake, we discover who he wants us to be.

We can't all sell up and move to a needy place like Tharaka. But each of us can carry the towel of service and wear the yoke of obedience in our neighbourhood, our workplace, our home. Like Jesus who knelt to wash his disciple's feet, we can seek out everyday opportunities to serve others.

The embarrassing encounter between James, John and Jesus must have been a life-changing moment for them. It's sobering to remember that James not only heard the challenge that Jesus gave him that day, but that he went on to live for it and die for it. We read in Acts 12:2 that James, the brother of John, was put to death by the sword. He gave his life in the service of Christ. He had learnt that life is not so much about success as about sacrifice. He did become great in the Kingdom of God.

A lifestyle that is modelled on servanthood is an alternative lifestyle but it's the most liberating lifestyle of all. It sets us free to care for others and to live for Jesus.

Will you make this new year a year of servanthood?



## Prayer

Dear Lord Jesus,  
Thank you for coming to earth  
In the form of a servant—  
A Servant-King.

At the start of this new year,  
Teach me to drink of the cup of suffering,  
Teach me to carry the towel of servanthood,  
Teach me to wear the yoke of obedience.  
May my attitude be like that of Jesus Christ.

4 JANUARY

## Jesus: the Head of the Body

EPHESIANS 1:19-23

*That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.*

I once met an Anglican priest who was ordained during Advent. Before talking to him, I'd never really understood the significance behind an Advent ordination. My friend explained that, just as John the Baptist was called to 'prepare the way' for Jesus on earth, so ministers of the gospel are called to prepare the Church for Christ's return on the last day.

The Christmas season, therefore, is not just a time for personal preparation as we anticipate Christ's return. It's also a time for corporate preparation in the life of the whole Church. It's an opportunity to remember that the Church is not an institution—it's the living and active body of Christ with Jesus as the Head:

*And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.*

COLOSSIANS 1:18

You may be able to survive an accident with the loss of an arm or a leg, a finger or a toe, but you would not survive long without your



head! The head co-ordinates, controls, facilitates and empowers all the various parts of the body to fulfil their individual functions.

The body of Christ only works when it lives under the authority of the head. Lack of submission to the head leads to total paralysis. When members of the body are not submitted to the head, they don't receive the right signals, they don't run in co-ordination with each other, and they're not submitted to the will of him to whom the body belongs.

Every part of the body of Christ, be it a struggling local congregation or a national church institution, needs to be submitted to the head and to live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Every part must respond to his will and fulfil his agenda. This is the only way in which we can engage in effective mission together.

Paralysis comes when parts of a body fail to function. A damaged spinal cord can lead to paralysed legs. A broken arm can restrict the movement of the hand. Blind eyes or deaf ears slow down the body's responsiveness. Sadly, many aspects of contemporary church life show signs of institutional paralysis. It's time we examined those parts of church life that aren't functioning well and give them major surgery so that the life of the body of Christ might become healthier again. If the Church of the new millennium is to make an impact, every member must play their part and fulfil their calling. Every believer must be equipped to fulfil their unique role in the body of Christ:

*Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.*

ROMANS 12:4-6

The body of Christ is joined by deep bonds of compassion and care. Paul's parable makes the point. When the tooth aches, the whole body suffers. When the finger has been cut, the body's defences are marshalled for healing. When the heart aches, the eyes shed tears. The people of Christ share a deep sense of interconnectedness with one another which the world can never comprehend.

At the start of this new year, there is much for us all to do. Together, we represent the life of Jesus here on earth. He has a massive agenda to undertake and we are the people with whom he wants to work. It's time to remove the institutional straitjacket and to free ourselves to function as the living body of Christ.

There is no argument between two legs as to which one should step out first, or between four fingers as to which one will point the way. In the same way, there should be no disagreement within the body of Christ as to how we serve the world. Paul wrote, 'The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body' (1 Corinthians 12:12).

New Year is a fresh opportunity for each of us to take our place in the body of Christ—all connected, all functioning, all healthy, all co-ordinated, all released, all working together under Christ who is the Head.

### Prayer

*O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen*

COLLECT FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER



## Jesus: the Way

JOHN 14:6

*Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'*

A few months ago, I was lost in Africa. I'd ridden up a steep mountain track in a clapped-out old minibus which was the only public bus service in the area. There were twelve seats but twenty-four passengers, fifteen sacks of maize and loads of live chickens. It was very crowded!

About an hour into our journey, the minibus got stuck in the mud and I was left to walk for miles to my destination. The rain was torrential and I was up to my knees in mud. I was completely lost on the mountain track with a big suitcase and no idea where I was or where I was headed.

A young teacher came to help me. I couldn't even pronounce his name, but he told me to trust him. I had little alternative! He picked up my case, strode out down a different path and told me to follow. I didn't know where he was leading me or who he was, but I simply trusted him and followed. Several miles further on, he led me to a village with a road which was still accessible and showed me the way back to civilization. I owe him a favour that I can never repay.

It's not pleasant to be lost. It can create a kind of inner panic and a sense of confusion which can make the strongest of us tremble. There is another kind of lostness, though, and it's very prevalent in our society today. It's a lostness about where we're headed in our lives and how we can find the way to meaning and happiness. This feeling of lostness can create an inner turmoil which makes us feel dissatisfied with our everyday existence.

If we have no direction or purpose for our being, then we have no

meaning in our lives. A sense of meaning, however, is crucial to our existence. Bruno Bettelheim recognizes that many human beings live their lives in a debilitating state of meaninglessness. He observes:

*If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives. It is well known how many have lost the will to live, and have stopped trying, because such meaning has evaded them.*

*THE USES OF ENCHANTMENT: THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF FAIRY TALES,*  
THAMES AND HUDSON, 1976

Perhaps New Year should be a time for checking our direction, and for re-charting our way. Perhaps it's an opportunity to face up to the inner lostness we all sometimes know, and seek again the One who is the Way.

Jesus strides across the centuries to speak to us again today. He comes to address our sense of lostness, our loss of direction, our lack of meaning. His clarion call to us, as to every generation, is simply, *'I am the Way'*.

In a society that has lost its purpose and is lost in such a confusing fog, this comes as a welcome signpost. It points us to Jesus, and to his invitation to 'Come, follow me', and to the right direction for our lives.

One of the most popular TV programmes in the UK is *Casualty*. Millions of people spend their Saturday nights watching unfortunate accidents and blood-curdling crises unfolding before them. One of the leading actors in a recent series was Paterson Joseph, who played the part of nurse Mark Grace. (He also starred in the blockbuster movie *The Beach* with Leonardo di Caprio.) In one episode of *Casualty*, I had to close my eyes while he punctured a teenage boy's lung to drain blood. Later, in conversation with Paterson, I told him how squeamish I was, and he explained that he had only been ripping open a piece of rubber!

Paterson went on to tell me about the sense of lostness that he had once felt in his own life. At that time he was a Rastafarian, and had been acting in a major movie called *In the Name of the Father*, which was filmed in Northern Ireland.



One lunchtime, during a break from filming, he joined the other actors for a drink at the pub. They dared him to ask a blonde girl called Emmanuelle, who was standing at the bar, for a romantic date. She accepted, but insisted that the date should be to accompany her to church the following Sunday morning. Reluctantly Paterson agreed. It turned out to be a date which would change his life. In church that Sunday, he found Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour, he was baptized, and discovered the true direction for his life. Emmanuelle is now his wife and they are both prominent members of a church in Surrey.

On that Sunday in Belfast, Jesus Christ changed Paterson's life and he found a way out of the lostness and emptiness he'd felt. Through Jesus, Paterson Joseph found the way, the path, the true direction for his life.

### Prayer

*Jesus... sometimes I feel lost.*

*Lost about who I am.*

*Lost about which way is right.*

*Lost about my direction.*

*Lost about my future,*

*Lost, even about who I am.*

*This Advent season, Lord.*

*Come, find me again,*

*Come, show me the way,*

*Come, guide me home.*

### Meditation

*'Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it.'*

MATTHEW 7:13-14 (CEV)

6 JANUARY

## Jesus: Omnipresent

MATTHEW 2:1-2

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.'*

When the wise men left their palaces and journeyed across Palestine, they were on an impossible mission. Looking for the Messiah was as difficult as looking for a needle in a haystack. The wise men had only two clues—a bright star and a newborn baby. But stars are hard to follow, and newborn babies were plentiful. To make things more difficult, the newborn king wasn't to be found in a palace as they might have expected.

I'm sure that most of us would have given up and gone home. We'd have blamed our failure on the inadequacy of the information, on the inauspiciousness of our means of transport or on the intolerance of the king. The gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh would have been put back in storage for a different occasion on another day.

Many people give up the search for God today. They give up though no journey is required. They give up though no star is to be followed. They give up though no opposition is to be encountered. They give up before they even begin. The search for God just seems so out of place in such a technological and secular society.

But it's not such a hard search any more. It's not like looking for one new baby in a whole country. What's more, he's promised, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' He is as close to us as breathing, as near to us as touching, as intimate to us as thinking.

A few years ago, during a holiday in Spain, I took a twenty-minute



lesson in sub-aqua diving. I found out later that this wasn't a very wise thing to do, because to be properly prepared you need to be trained for many hours! The instructor told me about the breathing apparatus and showed me the little dial which indicated how much air I had left. He showed me how to clear my goggles when they got misted up, dressed me in a wetsuit and flippers, and gave me my final instructions: 'Whatever you do, don't ever go to the surface without me. You might get the "bends". Now, follow me!'

Within minutes, we were swimming deep beneath the waves among a myriad tiny fish. I did my best to follow him, but he was much too fast a swimmer for me to keep up. Gradually I fell behind until all I could see was the darkness of the ocean before me.

What was I to do? I couldn't see him and he'd told me not to surface. So I just stood on the seabed and waited, and watched my air-supply gradually diminishing. It was at that moment, in that bizarre situation, that I remembered a verse from the Bible. 'Where could I go to escape from your Spirit or from your sight? If I were to climb up to the highest heavens, you would be there. If I were to dig down to the world of the dead you would also be there' (Psalm 139:7-8). There, on the bottom of the ocean, I knew that the Lord was with me.

From the highest mountain to the deepest sea, he is there. In the six-mile-high jet and in the mile-deep submarine, he is there. There is no place where I cannot find him, no place that he cannot reach, no situation from which he is excluded. He is ever-present.

Time and again in my own Christian life, I have stumbled on him in the unlikeliest places. I have discovered him in the most unexpected conversations. I have come across him in the neediest of people. Only our worldly priorities, our busy timetables and our selfish preoccupations can exclude him.

One of the most important characteristics of Jesus Christ is that he is with us. He is with us in the cut and thrust of life as well as in the quiet sanctity of prayer. He is with us in the rush and bustle of Christmas shopping as well as in the hush and holiness of Christmas worship. Discovering his presence is one of the greatest joys of the Christian life—knowing him as the silent listener to every conversation; welcoming him as the unseen guest at every dinner table;

hearing him as the still small voice behind every big decision.

There is no camel, no star and no stable today, but he is still to be found. His life permeates our lives and when we search for him we will find him, and when we look for him, he is there.

### Prayer

*May I find you, today,*

*In the joys of my life.*

*In smiles and greetings,*

*In hugs and helpers,*

*In whispered affirmations*

*And in laughter shared.*

*May I find you, today,*

*In the sorrows of my life.*

*In tears and tempers,*

*In hurts and heartaches,*

*In whispered cries,*

*And in trouble shared.*



## Jesus: Lord of the Harvest

LUKE 10:1-3

*After this the Lord appointed seventy two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go. He told them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.'*

In the days after Christmas, I often do an annual 'stocktake' of my life. I look at the priorities for the coming year, agonize over what commitments to undertake and what to leave aside. It's an important time for reviewing my relationship with Jesus, and for recognizing him as the Lord of my time.

The title 'Lord' was attributed to Jesus from the earliest proclamation of his coming. The angel told the shepherds that the newborn child was a 'Saviour, who is Christ the Lord'. If, then, we are to understand who Jesus is, we must submit ourselves to him and make him the Lord of our lives.

In Luke 10, we read how Jesus commissioned his disciples for mission and how he asked them to work for the 'Lord of the harvest'. This Lord of the harvest, however, was none other than himself. On their mission they began to discover what this really meant and on their return they called him 'Lord' (Luke 10:17).

In these days following Christmas, we must begin to prepare for a new year with all its rich possibilities for mission and evangelism. At such a time as this, it's important that we come under the Lordship of Christ and are willing to go and share the good news of his coming with everyone.

Our particular harvest field may look bare and barren, but the scattered seed releases the miraculous potential for harvest. We who

sow are not called to be successful, only faithful; we are not called to look back at what might have been, only to look forward to what will surely be. We are not called to make gloomy predictions about the outcome but to sow in hope. The sower should never feel despondent, for God promises that there will be harvest.

If you want a good harvest, don't let a statistician sow the seed. He'll stand in the autumn furrow and try to calculate the chances of the seed surviving. He'll anticipate chill winds, heavy snows and frozen earth, and will forecast a poor harvest, if any harvest at all.

If you want a good harvest, don't use a pollster to sow the seed. He'll stand, opinion poll in one hand and calculator in the other, and compute the chances of a crop. He's canvassed public opinion and decided that harvests aren't popular any more.

If you want a good harvest, don't ask a committee to sow the seed. They'll stand at the edge of the field muttering disapprovingly to each other and protecting their pristine green Wellington boots from the mud. They'll conclude that the soil is poor and the prospects bleak, and will vote that the seed should not be sown... at least, not this year.

If you want a good harvest, don't employ an agricultural expert to sow the seed. His diploma in soil management, his degree in farm technology and his doctorate in agrarian history have not prepared him for such a task. He sits at his computer and produces coloured graphs projecting the failure of the crop, but he never sows seed himself. He never ventures out into the field or feels the rich, dark soil running between his fingers. His thesis argues that harvests are a thing of the past and that the sowing of seed is no longer worth the effort.

But somewhere beyond the grey boundary of the urban sprawl, a sower goes out to sow. He barely understands the process, let alone the depressing predictions of the experts. He throws the raw seed into the prevailing wind and his heart is full of hope. He is driven by a conviction too deep for words and by a commission enshrined in the simple word, 'Go'. The sower knows that, against all odds, harvest will surely come.

A harvest vision sees the gospel as a mustard seed, whose growth potential is beyond our understanding. It sees the gospel as a seed



growing silently, whose progress cannot be measured. It sees the gospel as a seed which, when planted in good soil, bears a harvest thirty, sixty or a hundredfold. The truth is that 'the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few' (Matthew 9:37).

Sowing has been out of fashion for too long, and those who should have scattered the seed have stayed at home. We need a new vision for evangelism and mission which is brought to birth in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We must wait on him and hear his ringing command: 'Go'. We must submit ourselves to his Lordship, and take the good news of his coming to a hurting world.

Jesus once stood in a wintry field when there was nothing to see but barren land and declared, 'Do you not say, "Four months more and then the harvest"? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest' (John 4:35).

Jesus was looking at that bare field with the eye of faith and could already see that it was ripe for harvest! He could see the crop that would grow, the bountiful harvest yet to be. He could even see beyond the end of time when the sower and the reaper would rejoice together.

Let's pray that God will open our eyes, too! Let's begin to see a harvest where there is only barren land. Let's serve the Lord of the harvest by telling others that he is the Lord.

Let's take every opportunity to tell others about Jesus over the coming year.

### **Prayer**

*Eternal God,*

*You have declared in Christ*

*The completion of all your purpose in love.*

### **(Intercession)**

*We pray for*

*the tempted and despairing...*

*the sick and handicapped...*

*the aged...*

*the ministries of care and healing...*

*those who mourn...*

*the departed...*

### **(Thanksgiving)**

*We give thanks*

*for the triumphs of the gospel that herald your salvation,*

*the signs of renewal that declare the coming of your kingdom,*

*the human lives that reveal your work of grace...*

*for the unceasing praise of the company of heaven,*

*the promise to those who mourn that all tears shall be wiped away,*

*the pledge of death destroyed and victory won...*

*for our foretaste of eternal life through baptism and Eucharist,*

*our hope in the Spirit,*

*the communion of saints...*

*May we live by faith, walk in hope, and be renewed in love,*

*Until the world reflects your glory*

*And you are all in all.*

*Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.*

PRAYERS FROM THE JOINT LITURGICAL GROUP (SPCK)